The church interiors in the East in the period of the 4th-7th century were adorned with images of Christ, the Apostles, Prophets and Saints as well as with scenes drawn from the Gospels. All of them were arranged on the walls and made according to the established patterns. The artists’ aim was to completely cover the interior walls with images, as if they were tapestries. The most prominent Greek Fathers, like Gregory of Nyssa, Asterios of Amaseia, Nilus of Ancyra or Choricius of Gaza, time and again mention and describe painting and mosaic church decoration. Asterios of Amaseia in his pamphlet on the rich (de divite et Lazaro) compared richly ornamented gowns to church walls adorned with figural images. The patterns included the figures of boars, lions, leopards, bulls, or dogs, and landscapes with rocks, forests and hunters. They also pictured the gospel scenes as for example. the Wedding of Cana or the miracles of Christ. Nilus of Ancyra wrote that churches should be decorated with images on account of the illiterate, who cannot read the Bible themselves. The pictures...
would show them the life of the true servants of God, he continued, and encourage them to imitate of their great virtues (Ep. 61 ad Olympiodorum)³.

The consecration sermon on the Church of the Three Young Men of Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria (AD 385-412) preserved in Coptic translation (H.de Vis 1929) is illustrative of the above cited opinions of the Church Fathers. In this paper we will consider a series of descriptions contained in this sermon and the related mutual inspirations between the literature and the visual arts, that is the relationship between art and eloquence. However, before we come to the details which are the subject of our inquiry, we have to discuss the sermon’s authenticity. H. de Vis, the editor of the sermon which was said at the consecration ceremony of the Church of the Three Young Men in Alexandria, labelled it an ‘oeuvre d’un faussaire.’⁴. M.Richard who compiled a catalogue of the written works attributed by the Coptic tradition to Theophilus, shared the same opinion. In his view ‘the consecration sermons’ (the sermon on the Church of the Three Young Men (Or. 40 Richard) and on the Church of St. Raphael (Or. 41 Richard) and the Church of the Holy Family on Mount Coscam (Or. 42 Richard) preserved under the name of Theophilus of Alexandria are inauthentic⁵.

The Coptic tradition which we know from the colophon of the 9⁰-10⁰ century manuscript says that the sermon was preached by Archbishop Theophilus in the martyrion (MAPTYPION) of the Three Young Men in Alexandria. This occurred on their feast day, that is on the 10⁰ of Pashons (PAWJONC) which also became the consecration day of their new church (TOPPOS), in the presence of Abba John the Hermit, Archimandrite of Mount Siout monastery and later Bishop of Shmoun⁶.

In fact there is little evidence of Theophilus’ once numerous writings and sermons⁷. I also feel unable to prove the sermon’s authenticity (Or. 40). Nevertheless, I would like to point to some of its components which in my view come from the period of Theophilus. The sermon undoubtedly was a historical fact. I believe the Or. 40 is a Coptic translation from the Greek original. I do not think L.Lefort, who believed that Theophilus also preached in Coptic, was right⁸. Müller aptly observed that ‘Die Koptische Redekunst verleugnet

---

⁴ De Vis H., Homélies Coptes de la Vatican, vol. 2, Hauniae 1929, p. 121.
⁶ de Vis H., Homélies Coptes..., pp. 124-5.
⁸ Lefort L., Athanasiana coptica [in:] Le Muséon 69, 1956, pp. 232-241; following Orlandi T.,
also nie ihre orientalische Herkunft und ihren ägyptischen Hörerkreis. Koptische Reden, die mit Wortspielen und Satzbau der Griechischen Rhetorik folgen, dürfen in jedem Falle als nicht ägyptisch betrachtet werden. \(^9\) In fact the *Or.*40 reveals a Greek rhetorical training. It may be illustrated by numerous *ecphrastic* components (*ἐκθέσεις*), which illustrate a hagiographic cycle with Theophilus, John the Hermit and the Three Young Men as its central characters. Such a cycle might have been the subject of a set of frescos or mosaic decorations in an Alexandrian church or in the city’s environs. I am going to discuss some of Theophilus’ *ecphrasis* in more detail later on. Here for our present needs I would like to arrange them consecutively in a small catalogue. They are as follows: a garden with wild beasts and demons (de Vis p.138), the idol of Nabuchodenazzar (de Vis 140), the appearance of the Three Young Men (de Vis p.143), the city of Babylon (de Vis pp.143-144), the palace of Nabuchodenazzar (de Vis p.143), the tomb of the Martyrs in Babylon (de Vis p.147). The *ecphrasis* under discussion are located in the central part of the oration. At least one of them, the description of Babylon, was inspired by Herodotus’ Babylon from Book I of his *History*, and perhaps also another one, Theophilus’ palace of Nabuchodonazzar, suggested by the Herodotean Temple of Marduk.

---


in Babylon. The Or.40 (Richard) is also illustrative of Aristotle’s prooemion and epilogos principle, the former aimed at attracting the audience’s attention (the miraculous vision of St. Athanasius), the latter offering a memorable conclusion to the speech (the intercession of the Three Young Men as a source of God’s grace). Judging by what is extant of Theophilus’ writings we can say that the Latin translations made by St. Jerome and the sermon under discussion actually reveal the lustre of the orator in the full development of his rhetorical devices. Concluding Theophilus’ sermon does not look to have been a Coptic production.

The second argument for Theophilus’ authorship is his well established fame as a church builder. The Alexandrian Synaxarion refers to his seven church foundations. However it names only some of them: the Churches of the Virgin Mary, the Archangel Raphael, St. John the Baptist, the Prophet Elias and the Three Young Men. Sozomen wrote that he converted a Dionysiac sanctuary into a church (HE 7,15). We also learn of the Alexandrian Serapeum, which after a violent confiscation was transformed into the Church of St. John the Baptist. The tradition says that Theophilus wrote a booklet about this meaningful event in the history of the Early Church. He was also the one who started the construction of the world famous pilgrimage centre of Abu Mena. The Church of the Three Young Men proved to be the most memorable of all his foundations. It is referred to time and again by different literary sources. We learn more about it in his consecration sermon (Or.40 Richard) where Theophilus also recalled the Churches of John the Baptist and Archangel Raphael.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\text{Ep.87, 92, 96, 98, 100; Jerome also translated Theophilus’ now lost invective against John Chrysostomus.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{11}}\text{Spanel D., Theophilus..., p. 2248; Synaxarium Alexandrinum I-II, (ed.) Forget J., CSCO 78, (1921), pp. 72f., CSCO 90 (1926), pp. 111f.; The Church of the Virgin Mary is also corroborated in the Annals of Eutychius of Alexandria (Patrologia Graeca 111, 1025-6); the Church of Raphael by the History of the Patriarchs 2 (ed.) Evetts, p. 430.}\]


\[\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\text{Spanel D., Theophilus..., p.2248; Synaxarium Alexandrinum 1, p.77, (ed.) Forget J., see above n.11; Theophilus’ Vision of the Holy Family in Syriac attributed to Theophilus [in:] M.Geerard, Clavis Patrum Graecorum 2, 1974, p.125, no 2628, Turnhout 1974; Theophilus’ consecration sermon in Bohairic (De Vis H., Homélies Coptes...), also known from the Ethiopic version (M.Geerard, Clavis Patrum..., p.124, no 2626).}\]
in Alexandria\textsuperscript{14}. We learn that it was a church with the adjacent \textit{martyrion} (de Vis p.124), that it was lit by oil lamps (de Vis p.153), it had ivory thrones in the chancel (de Vis p.155), that it was built in seven months and richly decorated with precious stones and wood of the best quality. The latter probably should be read as referring to wooden appurtenances, reliefs, cancellae, doors etc. (de Vis p.135). It is not easy to decide how to interpret his ‘precious stones’ (\textit{ouni eutaihoyt}). As ‘jewels’, that is as ‘liturgical vessels studded with precious stones’ or as ‘mosaic decoration’? We also learn about his large-scale building activities from the malicious comments of his contemporaries. Palladius (\textit{Dialogus} 22) and Isidorus of Pelusium (\textit{Epistulae} 1.152) called him a ‘lithomaniac’. Isidorus thw in: ‘money worshipper’\textsuperscript{15}.

The third argument for Theophilus’ authorship can be drawn from the well established tradition of John the Hermit’s pilgrimage to Babylon in search of the relics of the Three Young Men which is corroborated by Sahidic, Bohairic, Syriac, Ethiopic and Arabic texts\textsuperscript{16}. The very fact of such a pilgrimage cannot be doubted.

After the discussion of the consecration sermon’s (\textit{Or}.40 Richard) authenticity we can come to the details of its contents which are going to focus our attention. In the present sermon the homilist tells us an edifying fabulous story of John the Hermit, Archimandrite of Mount Siout, who has already been mentioned above. He was commissioned by Bishop Theophilus to bring the relics of the Three Young Men from their tomb in Babylon\textsuperscript{17}. John failed to do it. The

\textsuperscript{14} De Vis H., \textit{Homélies Coptes...}, p.126.
\textsuperscript{16} De Vis H., \textit{Homélies Coptes...}, p.122; Life of John the Hermit by Zachariah of Shoou (Bohairic) (ed. Amélineau); a Sahidic passage on John the Hermit, ed.Amélineau); John Colobos’ own account of the pilgrimage in Sahidic (ed. Amélineau); The Life of John in Syriac (ed. F. Nau); \textit{Synaxarium Arabicum-Iacobiticum} (20th of Babeh); \textit{Synaxarium Ethiopicum} (29th of Nahase); The Ethiopic version of Theophilus’ consecration sermon; cf. also Van Esbroeck M., \textit{Three Hebrews in the Furnace}, [in:] Coptic Encyclopedia 7, 1991, p.2258.
\textsuperscript{17} We have confusing information about the place of deposition of their relics. The Armenian tradition speaks of their tomb in Persia. The Life of Macarius mentions their tomb in Ctesiphon as a centre of pilgrimage. We know that bishop Apollinaris (AD 550-571) treasured an Alexandrian reliquary which contained the hand of one of the Three Young Men. There were two other places where their relics were venerated in Jerusalem: a chapel founded by Bishop Juvenal in the Flavia building, and the monastery raised in 454/5 on the Mount of Olives, Van Esbroeck M., \textit{Three Hebrews...}, p. 2257-2259. Theophilus describes their tomb located in a cave in Babylon. Their mortal bodies rested on three golden funeral beds covered with silk and hyacinthe. The interior was lit day and night with a golden lamp (De Vis H., \textit{Homélies Coptes...}, p.147). This description gives us an interesting insight into a richly furnished ancient cave tomb.
Saints appeared before him and announced that God’s will was different. At the same time they promised him that they would appear at the consecration ceremony in Alexandria and perform many miracles. The sermon presents an accumulation of quotations, metaphors and figures of speech mostly drawn from the Bible. The pilgrim visited the place where Nabuchodenazzar set up the famous golden idol (*Dan.*3,1-7) and later took a rest under the willows on the River of Babylon (*Ps.*136) (de Vis p.141). And when he felt unable to cross the river the Archangel Michael led him through it in the same way that

2. The Three Young Men in Coptic and Nubian art (Rassart-Debergh 1984, p. 143)
the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea (Ex.14, 21) (de Vis p.141f.). There he met Azarias, Hananias and Misael accompanied by their deliverer the Archangel Michael (Dan.3, 49-50) (de Vis p.142). Together they entered the city of Babylon, where John could see the burning furnace into which the king had thrown the Three Young men (Dan.3,11-15), and also Daniel’s cave the authenticity of which was testified by the lions’ relics (de Vis p.144f.).

Let us look at Theophilus’ literary technique mirrored in a selected phrase which is illustrative of his biblical language. The Coptic text speaks time and again of Πρως Νξρωμ Εθμος (de Vis p.144, l.10), ‘the flame of the burning furnace,’ which is a linguistic calque of the LXX’s τῆς καμίνου τοῦ πυρὸς τῆς καιομένης (Vat., Alex.) (Jerusalem Bible: the burning fiery furnace), (Dan.3, 21; 3, 93) with substantives for substantives, and participle for participle in the original word order, and actually a Hebrew grammatical and phraseological construction in the background. Theophilus’ peculiar narrative style is not unique in the contemporary Graeco-Roman literatures. We find it, for example, in the itinerary of Egeria written in all likelihood in the mid-380s. It shares the same taste and interest for what can be labelled ‘Christian archaeology in the making.’ According to the rules of Greek rhetoric, Theophilus adorned his narrative with a series of descriptions. First of all, Father John approached the colossal idol which Nabuchodenazzar had erected on the plain of Ira (LXX (Vat., Alex.): Δερα). According to the account in the Book of Daniel the statue was monstrously tall and broad, and made of gold: Ἰωκώμ Ννοῦβ ... αἰερσότ ἐναγ ἐπεκδίκη Νεμ Πεκογοῖεν (de Vis p.140 l.1, l.4-5), and so colossal that John shook with fear at the sight (Dan.3,1). Theophilus did not conclude his ecphrasis at this point. He enriched it with a series of non-scriptural embellishments. He added two water pools, a typical component of the North Semitic pagan sanctuaries of the Roman Period, two thrones at the feet of the idol and the priests who were performing ablutions before the sacrificial rituals (de Vis p.140). Theophilus was also aware that the idol was very ancient: by his time it must have necessarily taken on a patina: Ἀσηρ Μφρτ Νογζοτ Νβαρωτ Ζτεν Πασαί Ννίγπονος Νεμνί Ιωτ Νεμνί Μογζωού (de Vis p.140, l.4-5). ‘It appeared to be as if made of brass as a result of old age, dew and rain water.’ At this point of his speech Theophilus introduced a further refinement. He populated the plain of Ira with wild beasts, snakes and evil reptiles (de Vis p.139) and demonised the idol itself: horrible cries were coming from the depths of the colossus as

Father John approached it. A dozen legions of demons surrounded the golden idol and John would have eventually fallen prey to their jaws if the Archangel Michael had not saved him. It is interesting to observe an iconographic detail: the demons which took the form of great dragons jumped into the ears of the colossus and disappeared: ευοι ἰπση εἰρήνης ἐνεκαιμω χαριὰς ἡγείκων (de Vis p.140, II.12-13). Thus he went far beyond the canonical text, which is not unusual in the writings of the Christian Fathers, who were strongly influenced by their rhetorical training. They were instructed by their masters in the art of selecting a narrative detail and elaborating it into a prolonged *ecphrasis* (description) or *ethopoia* (a character study). In his brilliant book *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* H. Maguire provided us with a number of examples illustrative of this technique. He showed, for example, how John Chrysostomos elaborated upon a short narrative sequence quoted from the story of the daughter of the Canaanite woman who was healed: ‘My daughter is tormented by a devil,’ (Mt.15, 23) and successively developed it into a string of vivid details, which may actually be implied in the text, the outcome of which was a suggestive portrayal of madness in the classical literatures. An analogous illustration of the Hellenic rhetorical theory is John Chrysostomos’ elaboration on the simple wording of ‘he had all the male children killed who were two years old or under’ (Mt.3, 16), with the introduction of a long series of descriptive details substantially enriching the highly condensed story of the Massacre of the Innocents. Maguire convincingly showed how those elements invented by the rhetoricians were transferred from the literary to the visual repertoire of the late antique and Byzantine art, or in other words how the literary clichés acquired their visual equivalents. On a Late Byzantine mosaic set in the 12th century in the Cathedral of Monreale, we find a wonderful portrait of a girl, the possessed daughter of the Canaanite woman, accompanied by a winged devil which enters her mouth (Fig. I). It cannot altogether be excluded that Theophilus was guided by a pictorial model, that somewhere he had seen a painting similar to the one he described in his sermon. It might have been an il-

---


lumination which adorned a contemporary manuscript of the *Book of Daniel*.

His description of Babylon is illustrative of yet another popular Greek genre of formal description, the *ecphraseis* of towns, one of the favourite subjects of the most influential Greek rhetoricians. The literary history of the genre begins, as almost everything, in the Greek letters with Homer (a town in war and peace on the Shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the *Iliad*), however only the model *ecphrasis* of Babylon by Herodotus (I, 178-186) actually constitutes a starting point for the prose literary form. Herodotus was followed by Plato and his Atlantis in the *Critias*. The rhetoricians of the Second Sophistic like Dio Chrysostomos, Aelius Aristeides or Libanius, who delivered the literary models for the Christian rhetoricians, were particularly fond of the genre. This is one stream of inspiration felt in the Coptic sermon of Theophilus. The *Apocalypse* of St. John is another one. St. John’s Babylon (*Rev.17–19,10*) makes up the antithesis of John the Evangelist’s heavenly Jerusalem. Theophilus’ Babylon sinks in darkness and a terrible storm which resembles the smoke coming up from a burning furnace (de Vis p.140), a picture

---

which immediately calls to mind the imagery of St. John’s *Apocalypse*: ‘never again will shine the light of the lamp’ (*Rev. 18, 22*). The pilgrim from Egypt also faced the walls which surrounded Babylon: *ainay ezanniuq† Naeigion Naeemun ziixen nicobt nte nityproc eyoi mpemot ngdarakwn* (de Vis p.143, ll.7-9). ‘And I saw numerous legions of demons, on the towers of the city walls, which had the shape of dragons.’ They belched out fire from their poisonous jaws. They attacked Father John and wanted to devour him, but he was once again saved, this time by the Three Young Men, who were his guides to the city. The passage can be read both literally, that is as a demoniac vision, and metaphorically. It cannot altogether be excluded that Theophilus’ description reflected a traveller’s account, of someone who saw with his own eyes the Neo-Babylonian reliefs of hybrid monsters which adorned the walls and towers of sixth-century Babylon, even today an unforgettable experience to a visitor of the Altes Museum in Berlin or the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul.

The sermon is populated with different kinds of demons. We have already seen the dragons which jumped into the mouth of the colossus (de Vis p.140), and others which were seen on the towers of Babylon (de Vis p.143). We also find them in the *ekphrasis* of the garden, where they take the shape of ‘the centaurs and other horrifying dragons’ *zantokentayproc nem zanekeniq† Narakwn eyoi nrot† emaww* (de Vis p.138, ll.13-4). The Greek centaurs can be occasionally found in Coptic art. One of the best known Coptic icons, which shows St. Sisinnios piercing Alabastria, a female demon, also pictures a winged siren, Alabastria’s daughter, and a centaur23. The demonisation of the pagan art had already built up a long tradition with the Christian intellectuals by the time of Theophilus. We recognize the situation from the writings of Tatian, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian or Minucius Felix.24 However, until the time of Constantine the Great it had remained exclusively a matter of words and the expression of aniconic and anti-pagan attitudes. In Theophilus’ times and particularly in his account the above-quoted words sound ominous. Theophilus of Alexandria was personally responsible for the seizure and destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum, one

---


of the most famous pagan temples of the Mediterranean basin (AD 391).\textsuperscript{25} The same demonic picture returns frequently in the writings of another great leader of Egyptian Christianity, Shenute of Atripe, who also led his monks together with the Christians of Thebais against the sanctuaries of the ancient Egyptian gods.\textsuperscript{26} Theophilus of Alexandria and Shenute account for only a chapter in a much longer history of destruction of the pagan temples in the eastern provinces of the Empire in the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} century. Demonisation justifies destruction. The writings of Theophilus and Shenute were not compiled merely as a display of rhetorical skills.

The seven concentric walls encompass the Babylon of Father John Colobos, so they enclose six different cities. This immediately calls to mind Herodotus’ description of Ecbatana (I, 98), and Plato’s city of Atlantis from \textit{Critias}, which in its turn was also in all likelihood inspired by Herodotus’ description of Ecbatana. We find here a very good example which is illustrative of the problem of ‘literary models vs autopsy.’ One who is occupied with \textit{ecphrasis} must be very careful about it. The \textit{ecphrasis} from autopsy is something very different from the \textit{ecphrasis} which was styled on or imitated from her literary model.

In the imaginary pilgrimage of John the Hermit the city of Babylon had been deserted by human beings, and populated only by snakes, reptiles and other evil creatures, which certainly recalls St. John’s phraseology from the \textit{Apocalypse}: ‘Babylon has fallen ... and has become the haunt of devils and a lodging for every foul spirit’ (Rev.18, 2) (cf.Is 34, 11f.). The literary technique is transparent. Theophilus’ sermon resembles a texture woven out of literary allusions and verbal quotations drawn from the \textit{Book of Daniel}, St. John’s \textit{Apocalypse}, Herodotus’ \textit{Histories} and Plato’s \textit{Critias} enriched with some images from life. It is likely and I personally believe it that at least some of the \textit{ecphraseis} in the sermon refer to the painted wall decoration of the Church of the Three Young Men in Alexandria, which was the usual habit in the rhetorical praises of Christian churches.

Theophilus introduced one more component of the formal \textit{ecphrasis} of a city: a description of a palace. The Egyptian monk came to visit Nabuchodenazzar’s palace, which was synonymous with the Old Testament and proverbial apocalyptic richness of Babylon. Theophilus’ \textit{ecphrasis} begins with an emphatic expression of the palace’s richness: \textit{οὐσφηρὶ ἐμαυῳ ὅε

\textsuperscript{25} See above n.12.

It is a great miracle remarkable for its excellence and shape, for sure there is no other palace in the whole world, the construction of which might be compared with this one, which was built of real pearls, and rubies (?), the purest gold and choice silver (cf. Rev. 18, 16-17: ‘for all your finery of gold and jewels and pearls, your richness are all destroyed within a single hour’). Several lines earlier in his itinerary John the Hermit recalled the opulence like sand on the sea shore,’ which also corresponds with the Apocalypse’s description of Babylon.

Egeria repeatedly mentioned her experienced guides who introduced her into the world of ‘Biblical archaeology’. This was evidently a stylistic component employed in such itineraries. Father John also had his guides. They were the Three Young Men of Babylon. The description of their attire is conspicuous for a couple of details which go beyond the canonical text, both the Manuscript Syrus as well as the codices Alexandrinus and Vaticanus:

_The Saints appeared in great glory and great joy. They were dressed in royal gowns of the finest linen of byssos and hyacinthe, they wore golden belts on their hips and hoods of silk (Σανχλαυτ Νολοσυρικον) on their heads and were surrounded with great glory.’ The essential Septuagint text which inspired both the Christian rhetoric and art reads as follows: They were dressed σὺν τοῖς σαροβάροις αὐτῶν καὶ τιάραις καὶ περικνημίσι καὶ ἐνδύμασι αὐτῶν (Vat., Alex.) ‘in Oriental breeches, tiaras, high shoes and cloaks.’ The Syrus manuscript (Annaeus) speaks of τὰ ύποδήματα αὐτῶν καὶ τὰς τιάρας αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τῶν κεφαλῶν αὐτῶν σὺν τῷ ἰματισμῷ αὐτῶν. They wore ‘sandals and tiaras on their heads and cloaks.’

---

The original text is actually endowed with pictorial qualities which at first sight look like components suitable either for rhetorical or figural embellishments. In fact there are details in the Coptic text which differ from the basic Septuagint version suggestive of a pictorial inspiration. The Three Young Men were represented ‘in great glory and joy’ which is typical of the standard portraits of martyrs. Maguire devoted some of the most impressive pages of his book to the representation of martyrdom in the Early Byzantine art and literature. He quoted an influential description by Asterios of Amaseia of St. Euphemia’s martyrdom which was painted on a cycle of tableaux and put on display in her martyrion in Chalcedon. Maguire illustrated the paradigm with a series of manuscript illuminations which show the martyrs ‘in joy and glory.’ The idea is conventionally pictured by a number of devices as raised hands, the

---

hand of God stretching out from heaven, the statuesque, motionless body and peaceful face among the flames or the beasts etc (Fig. III-VI).\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Σανγβος Νοήμεν Νούρωυ (…)} \textit{Νεμ Ουγιακοινωινον} can be interpreted as synonymous of ‘richly decorated purple (or red-coloured) royal dress of the finest linen.’ They also wore the golden belts which shone against the royal purple of their gowns adorned with golden ornaments. Besides they also wore ‘the hoods of silk,’ and not tiaras, as related in both alternative readings offered by the \textit{Septuagint} manuscripts. These details are so vivid that it seems quite possible that Theophilus had seen a painting similar to the one he recalled in his sermon, perhaps in an illuminated \textit{Bible}, perhaps in a church adorned with fresco or mosaic decoration.

In fact by the 4\textsuperscript{th}/5\textsuperscript{th} century the subject of the Three Young Men in the Furnace had been already fully developed in the figural arts, that is in the age of a growing veneration of the martyrs. The Christian painters and mosaics, guided by the churchmen, found a suitable prefiguration in the Three Young Men, and through it they visualized the ordeals of the Christian martyrs. This invention became a standard cliché of their art. Not the subject but the details are decisive if we are to identify the reciprocal influence of the figural arts and literature. Maguire amply demonstrated the problem by referring to subjects like the Massacre of the Innocents or the daughter of the Canaanite woman, which clearly show how a condensed narrative deprived of details can be transferred from the literary to the visual repertoire. As a result of the process many non-scriptural details found their way into the figural images\textsuperscript{30}. The Three Young Men in the Furnace also serve as an illustrative instance of the phenomenon. Some details which appear in the Coptic text may be implied in the biblical account. They show, I think, that Theophilus was guided by a pictorial model.

This claim can be substantiated by a collection of images which were once put together by E.Drioton in two papers published in the \textit{Bulletin de la Société d’Archéologie Copte} (1942, 1944). Drioton’s papers were developed into a series of thorough studies by M.Rassart-Debergh, of which \textit{Les Trois Hébreux dans la fournaise en Égypte et en Nubie chrétienne} (1984) is central to us\textsuperscript{31}.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Maguire H., \textit{Art and Eloquence...}, pp.34-42.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Maguire H., \textit{Art and Eloquence...}, pp. 24ff., 74ff.
\end{itemize}
She observed that while in general the images inspired by the Old Testament are rare in Coptic and Christian Nubian art, the Three Young Men gained exceptional popularity in Egypt. They were also popular in the Early Christian art of the Western provinces. However, the differences in their iconography and chronology (they are almost absent form the Greek Byzantine art) between Egypt and Nubia on the one hand and Christian art in the West were more meaningful than their similarities. The Three Hebrews entered the repertoire of Western art in the form of two original compositions which were followed thereafter as their standard iconographic patterns by other artists. They are:

1. The Three Young Men face Nabuchodenazzar in the scene of judgement with the idol, which they refuse to adore.
2. They are pictured in the scene of martyrdom in the fiery furnace. An example of the first pattern is an early wall painting from the Roman Catacombs of Priscilla (cubiculum clarum) (late 3rd century), where they turn away with contempt from the idol (Fig. II, 1). This same vivid gesture of abhorrence returns on a preserved fragment and a drawing by Beauméni of a once magnificent sarcophagus adorned with the

5. Dalton’s drawing of the original painting on Wadi Sarjah (Dalton 1916, Pl. IX)

---

32 Rassart-Debergh M., *Les Trois Hébreux dans la Fournaise en Égypte et en Nubie Chrétien-
nes*, Rivista degli Studi Orientali 58, 1984, p.141.


Christological cycle published by J.Wilpert (1925)\textsuperscript{35}, and in a more hieratic and symmetrical composition of four persons arranged in a row on a painting from the Catacombs of Saints Mark and Marcellinus, discussed by L.de Brugy\textsuperscript{36}. In the latter they again appear in Phrygian caps, while Nabuchodonassar is pictured dressed in Roman armour, which must have been read as a clear allusion to the persecution of Christians by the Roman state, if not specifically by Roman Emperors. The Three Young Men in the Catacombs of Priscilla had a symmetrically placed pendant, their iconographical analogon – a tableau with the Three Magi similarly dressed in conventional Oriental style with Phrygian caps represented in the Epiphany scene before the Virgin Mary and Child\textsuperscript{37}. The second of the two above-mentioned standard patterns seems to have been even more popular judging by the statistics that are at our disposal: the Three Young Men in the fiery furnace were pictured on an ‘impressionistic’ fresco painting executed by a skilful painter who worked at the turn of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} century in the Roman Catacombs of Priscilla (the Velatio Chamber) (Fig.III). The scene of martyrdom returns again and again in the Christian art throughout the 4\textsuperscript{th} century, that is in the lifetime of St.Theophilus of Alexandria, as for example on a wall painting in the Roman Catacombs of Domitilla (\textit{Cubiculum} of the Three Magi, late 4\textsuperscript{th} century) (Fig.II,3)\textsuperscript{38} or of Callixtus (Fig.II,4)\textsuperscript{39}. In the latter the Archangel appears behind the martyrs, which is a variation of the traditional pattern probably inspired by the art of the Christian Orient (cf.Fig.IV). A splendid silver reliquary from Milan Cathedral, a work of exquisite charm and perfect execution, dated to Theophilus’ incumbency (AD 385-412), again shows the Babylonian Martyrs with the Angel among them\textsuperscript{40}. Their popularity in the everyday religion of the early Christians is attested to not only by the number of extant images but by different media of representation as well. We can find them on sarcophagi, in the catacomb painting, mosaics and minor

\textsuperscript{35} Wilpert J., \textit{Una perla della scultura cristiana di Arles}, Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana 2, 1925, pp. 35-53, fig. A-B.


\textsuperscript{37} ibid. fig.6; Vezin G., \textit{L’adoration et le cycle des Mages dans l’art chrétien primitif. Etude des influences orientales et grecques sur l’art chrétien}, Paris 1950; on the analogous Oriental dress of the Magi, see pp. 65-72.

\textsuperscript{38} Rassart-Debergh M., \textit{Les Trois Hébreux...}, p.142; Carletti C., \textit{I tre giovani...}, no 104.

\textsuperscript{39} Rassart-Debergh M., \textit{Les Trois Hébreux...}, p.143, Pl.1a; Carletti C., \textit{I tre giovani...}, no 103.

\textsuperscript{40} Du Bourguet P., \textit{L’art paléochrétien}, Paris 1970, p. 25.
arts\textsuperscript{41}. They met with particular veneration in the Coptic Egypt\textsuperscript{42}.

While the Western Christianity emphasised the scenes of judgement with Nabuchodenazzar and their martyrdom, the Coptic art focused on the motif of their salvation: the martyrs are pictured with their arms raised to God, while the Saving Angel descends from heaven and extinguishes the fire with his rod (which later changed into an elongated cross) (Fig.IV). The rod resembles the magic rod of Christ from miracle scenes in the Early Christian art\textsuperscript{43}. In her invaluable study Rassart-Debergh identified one relief and 14 paintings of the Three Young Men in the repertoire of Coptic art\textsuperscript{44}. The martyrs are remarkable for their Oriental dress, which we labelled Palmyrenian or Parthian (Fig. IV-VI). It was also pictured with the words of Theophilus. Let us direct our attention for a while to those Coptic images which are conspicuous for the richness of their Oriental apparel. I have in mind wall paintings from Wadi Sarjah modeled on an original dated to Theophilus’ incumbency (Fig.II,10; Fig.IV) and the monastery of St.Jeremiah in Saqqara (Fig.II,9)\textsuperscript{45}, as well as the above mentioned icon of Sinai (Fig.II,6), all three of them dated to the 6\textsuperscript{th}/7\textsuperscript{th} century. If the Coptic Young Men wore richly decorated gowns the Babylonian Martyrs in the Nubian churches were also dressed in even more extravagant clothes. We can admire the rich texture and design on a fresco painting from Abd-el-Gadir (6\textsuperscript{th} century) (Fig.II, 15)\textsuperscript{46}, or on an impressive fresco discovered in Faras, dated to the 10\textsuperscript{th} century (Fig.II,17; Fig.VI)\textsuperscript{47}, which has preserved the

\textsuperscript{41} Rassart-Debergh M., Les Trois Hébreux..., p.141.
\textsuperscript{44} Rassart-Debergh M., Les Trois Hébreux..., p. 144; This Egyptian pattern is also known from works outside of Egypt, as attested to by an ivory carving from Murano (kept in the Ravena Museum), probably a work of Egyptian origin, and one of the Sinai icons, both works dated in the 6th/7th centuries, Drioton E., Un dessin copte des Trois Hébreux dans la Fournaise, Bulletin de la Société d’Archéologie Copte 10, 1944, pp.80-85, p.84; Volbach W., Elfènbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und frühen Mittelalters, Mainz 1976, no. 125; Weitzmann K., The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. The Icons I, Princeton 1976, pp. 23-26; Rassart-Debergh M., Les Trois Hébreux..., p. 144.
\textsuperscript{45} Rassart-Debergh M., Les Trois Hébreux..., p.146 Pl.IIc; Quibell J., Excavations at Saqqara (1906-1907), Cairo 1908, Pl.LV, LVII.
vivid colours of its rich palette. The Faras painting is worth mentioning in this connection. Although it is late it followed a traditional pattern already attested to in the Exodus Mausoleum in Bagawat (Fig. II, 7)\textsuperscript{48}, which was covered with paintings in Bishop Theophilus’ time (4\textsuperscript{th}/5\textsuperscript{th} century). The Faras fresco painting is also important because of its unique state of preservation, its integral design and fresh colours. Thanks to its unique quality it can give us an idea of the original Egyptian church wall decoration in Alexandria in the period of Theophilus. Consequently we can safely conclude that Theophilus’ sermon had a rich contemporary iconographic context, which exerted its impact on the author’s vivid imagination. The Three Hebrews with the Saving Angel who extinguishes the fire were certainly pictured on the walls of their church in Alexandria and must have looked more or less like some of their images well known from Egyptian art that we referred to above. Theophilus’ description reflects such an iconographic pattern.

Drioton compiled an interesting paper, *Art syrien et art copte* (1937), in which he argued that the Coptic art was essentially eclectic, shaped by different inspirations, which may be defined as Alexandrian (Hellenic), Syro-Palmyrenian and Palestinian, as well as Persian and Mesopotamian\textsuperscript{49}. In his


paper he also emphasised that the Egyptian monks and Christians, who were highly distrustful of the pagan art, had no qualms about turning to the visual arts of Asia in search of a new idiom, to Asia, which was the homeland of the Saviour. This is the reason why the Palmyrenian or Palestinian decorative and visual arts so strongly affected the design and iconography of the Coptic images (Fig. 2: 6, 9, 10, 17; Fig. 4, 6).

Let us focus our attention on the Wadi Sarjah painting (Fig. 2:10, Fig. 4), which clearly shows a Coptic interpretation of the Old Testament Babylonian Martyrs. The fresco kept in the British Museum has been frequently published throughout the past century since its discovery as the ‘Three Young Men’. It pictures the Three Young Men in joy (with their hands raised) and glory. The angel, inscribed ἄγγελος, stands between Azarias and the Third Young Man, and symbolizes Divine intervention. The Three Young Men wear aristocratic dress, which consists of a chlamys, sleeved kaftan, soft shoes, anaxyrides (the Persian-style trousers), and belts, all of them adorned with rich woven designs. They do not wear tiaras, but Phrygian caps, described by the Egyptian interpreter as ‘the hoods of silk’ ἄναξαγώτ ΝΟΛΟΓΥΡΙΚΟΝ. Whether we label their dress ‘Persian,’ ‘Palmyrenian’ or ‘Syrian,’ we encounter it in many places throughout the ancient Near East in the Palmyranian reliefs, Hatran sculptures, Duran paintings or in the Christian mosaics, as attested by the Epiphany scene represented on the rainbow arch of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome. We have a thorough study of this dress once compiled by H.Seyrig (1937).

In fact the Wadi Sarjah fresco was originally the central part of a more complex composition (Fig. 5). This composition is the best representation of the interpretatio Christiana of the motif from the Book of Daniel. The central panel with the Three Young Men was originally surrounded by other figures. We can read their names: Saints Cosmas and Damian to the left and right of the Old Testament Martyrs, and the Three Brothers – Anthemos, Leontios and Eu prepios below. All five of them were victims of Diocletian’s persecution, were tortured and burnt at the stake in Aegae in Cilicia. The hagiographic sources say that while the Martyrs remained unscathed, the fire did not even touch their hair, at the same time many pagan witnesses were consumed by the flames.

Studi Orientali 58, pp.13-48; Guyer S., Le rôle de l’art de Syrie et de la Mésopotamie à l’époque prébyzantine, Syria 14, 1933, pp. 56-70.
50 Drioton E., Art syrien..., p. 39.
51 Seyrig H., Armes et costumes iraniens de Palmyre, Syria 18, 1937, pp.4-31.
Thus the story sounds as if modelled on the Book of Daniel. O. Dalton, discoverer of the painting, expressed opinion that the connection between the images and the dedicatory inscription was not obvious. He must have meant another connection apart from the obvious fact that Anthemos, Leontios and Euprepios were also brothers, and that they died in the same way as the Three Hebrews. Let us read the inscription again. Its reading differs in a couple of points in Dalton’s interpretation (1916) and Drioton’s edition (1944). I am quoting the latter reading:

\[
\text{πωμινττξογωτ \ μαρτερος \ ντςνουλοτ}
\]
\[
\text{πεγγου \ πε \ κωγι \ πακων \ μηνα \ κογι \ ις \ κο}
\]

‘Sixty martyrs of Snoulot / the day of the 12th of Mshur is their feast day / Little (ie humble) Esurkene, my brother little Menas (in the name) of Jesus Christ /’

The key to the interpretation is the number magic so beloved by the Ancients. The Coptic numeral speaks of ‘three score martyrs’, that is as if twenty of them died for each of the Three Young Men of Babylon.

\[
\text{ωμινττξογωτ} \hspace{1cm} \text{that is ‘three score’ is certainly not the usual way to say ‘sixty’ in Coptic. The numeral 60 is just CE.}
\]

The publication of the image deprived of its original ideological setting conceals the embarrassing secret – the secret of the devastation which occurred during the removal of the fresco from the wall and its transportation to the British Museum. In outcome only the Three Young Men remained intact.

We have been exploring relations between the figural arts and rhetoric. Let us point to yet another interesting connection between the literary tradition and Coptic art. In the sermon of Theophilus the Three Young Men stand at their tomb in Babylon and tell their story in the following way: ‘Behold, this is the...’


\[\text{Dalton O., A Coptic Wall Painting from Wadi Sarga, Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 3, 1916, p.36.}\]

\[\text{Dalton O., A Coptic Wall Painting..., p. 36; Dalton thanked W. Crum and H. Hall for the translation, ibid. p. 37.}\]

\[\text{Drioton E., Un dessin copte..., p.81.}\]

\[\text{Crum (Dalton O., A Coptic Wall Painting..., p.36) read ΤΗΟΓΙΩΤ (Siut), and ΖΟΥΡΚΕΝΕ (Hourkene), Drioton E., Un dessin copte..., p.81-CNOYALOT (Snulot) and ΕΚΟΥΡΚΕΝΕ (Esyrkene).}\]

\[\text{Crum actually translated it literally as ‘threescore martyrs’. It was also noticed by Drioton E., Un dessin copte..., n.1, p. 81.}\]

\[\text{Dalton O., A Coptic Wall Painting..., n.1, p.35}\]
place of our combat and suffering. To this place God sent his Angel and saved us from the raging flames of the fire and did not let us perish. He made the flame of the fire become like a breath of dew which cooled our bodies.’ I (sc. John the Hermit) looked down and saw the furnace which was like crystal, and clear as water and I was greatly amazed and glorified God, Who saves everyone who has hope in Him’ (de Vis p.144).

When read in its full extent this story can help us understand the intriguing indigenous predilection of the Egyptian and Nubian Christians in their figural arts for the story of the Three Young Men as a story of salvation. It is clearly visible from the simple statistics of words that the passage speaks of their martyrdom only in passing at the very beginning, while the main corpus of the text focuses on salvation from fire through Divine intervention. In this context we can again speak of a subtle thread of relation between Coptic art and literature. Some of Müller’s concluding words seem to be particularly apt in the present context: ‘In Alexandrien sassen die rechtgläubigen Griechen. Die Koptische Kirche war als häretisch verschrien. Wirtschaftlich wurde das Land von den Griechen in unerträglichem Masse ausgebeutet. (…) Die Koptische Kirche hat in stärkstem Masse unter der Ungest der politischen Lage zu leiden gehabt. Man braucht nur die Erlebnisse aus der Verfolgungszeit zu lesen in der Homilie über die Hochzeit zu Kana, die Benjamin von Alexandrien … verfasste. Dem Leser wird hier schlagartig die Situation deutlich. Nur diese eigene, wundergläubige … festhaltende koptische Frömmigkeit verhinderte, dass diese Kirche von den Mühlsteinen der Weltgeschichte gänzlich zermahlen wurde’59.

In his literary work Theophilus mirrored a popular image which in his own time became an influential prefiguration, a synonym and symbol, at a time of growing veneration of the martyrs, a social phenomenon which assumed a massive scale. We again touch upon the essential factor of the instructive, edifying or educational qualities discovered in the visual arts and promoted by the Church Fathers. The key position of the Cappadocian Fathers in the intellectual life of the early Church must have won the approval of many to have church interiors decorated, even where the local Christian communities or individuals were reluctant to accept the figural arts which might have been legitimately regarded as a breach of the Second Commandment. St. Basil wrote in his sermon in Sanctos Quadraginta Martyres that the orators embellished their brave deeds with words while ‘painters depicted them on their panels, and both had led many on to acts of bravery. For what spoken narrative presented

59 Müller C., Koptische Redekunst..., p.71.
through hearing, would silent painting showed through imitation’ (Or.19)⁶⁰. Much later John of Damascus would recall the same arguments at the height of the mid-8⁰-century iconoclastic polemics. Quoting St.Basil, he argued that ‘the images were the book of the illiterate,’ and concluded that ‘both Scripture and Christian art achieved their ends through the same means, through images ... they spoke ... because all Scripture read in church recounted to us either the descent of Christ, or the miracles of the Mother of God, or the lives and struggles of the saints, by means of images’ (adv.Constantinum Cabalinum).⁶¹

---
