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A SACRED SPACE FOR A HOLY ICON:
THE SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF SAYDNAYA

In fourteenth-century Florence, only a small percentage of the people had the heart (and the money) to embark on a voyage to the Holy Land for the remission of one's own sins. Those who stayed at home, however, had the chance to visit the *loca sancta* by virtue of a mental and spiritual exercise whose characteristics are unveiled to us by a still extant prayer in vernacular Italian: the title explains that "herewith are the voyages which are taken by those pilgrims going overseas for their souls' sake and which can even be taken by anybody staying at home and thinking of each place described herewith, by saying each time a *Paternoster* and an *Ave Maria*". Such an imaginary pilgrimage included not only the most holy places of Jerusalem and Palestine, where Our Lord lived and performed his miracles, but also other shrines being unrelated to Biblical or Evangelic topography; in this respect, a special passage within the prayer deserves to be quoted:

Then, you will go to Mount Sinai, and will find the tomb of Saint Catherine and her body whence oil gushes out. And you will also find a vase which the Virgin Mary put there with her own hands. Then you will go to Babylon, and will find a fountain, where the angel washed the clothes of our Lord, and hung the washing out to dry on a tree, and from that tree comes out the balm by the grace of God. And later you will go to Saint Mary of *Sardinai*, at six miles beyond Damascus¹.

¹ This text was first published by: *Melga M. Viaggi in Terra Santa descritti da anonimo trecentista e non mai fin qui stampati*. Naples, 1862, p. 7–11 (10–11); new edition by A. Lanza in: *Lanza A. and Troncarelli M. Pellegrini scrittori. Viaggiatori toscani del Trecento in Terrasanta*. Florence, 1990, p. 315–318, esp. 317.

The text mentions three places being located quite far from each other outside the Holy Land, i. e. the monastery of Saint Catherine's on Mount Sinai, the garden of Matariyya in the neighborhoods of Cairo and the shrine of Our Lady in Saydnaya near Damascus, Syria. The pious man, who is traveling throughout the Levant without leaving its house in Florence, can afford to visit them in a sequence, and is willing to do so since he is aware that each of them will provide him, though only virtually, with a miraculous liquid: the myron of Saint Catherine's body, the holy balm of Matariyya, and the prodigious sweat yielded by an icon in Saydnaya allegedly covered with human flesh, instead of paint².

Such a sweat, or oil, enjoyed a rather widespread renown in Western Europe during the Late Middle Ages. As early as the late 1180s the priorate of Our Lady of Altavaux (in the Haute-Vienne) boasted of preserving both Saint Catherine's myron and «the oil dripping out of the breasts of an image of the Virgin Mary»³. A detailed account enables us to understand how the relic and the icon's fame had reached the Western countries. In 1186, two pilgrims from Altavaux, Guy Chat and Aiméry Brun, had received a phial of holy oil by a Templar friar named Gautier de Marangers, who had also instructed them «about some miraculous events recently happened overseas». Brother Gautier had a very good knowledge of Saydnaya, since he had been a prisoner of Salaheddin in Damascus and, when he had been released, he had decided to visit that Marian shrine before going back to Jerusalem⁴. As some scholars have stressed, the Templars may indeed have played an important role in promoting the worship of the 'incarnated icon' of Saydnaya and in disseminating the relics of the holy oil⁵: this hypothesis is confirmed by later sources, such as

² The basic study on the monastery of Saydnaya is that by *Zayyat H.* Ta'rikh Saidnāyā. Harissa, 1932. Supplementary information is provided by *Allam B.* Saidnaya. Gift of Glorious Heritage. Damascus s.d.; *Keriaky R. E.* Saidnaya – History and Ruins. Damascus s.d.; *Pringle D.* The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. A Corpus. Cambridge, 1993–1998, II, p. 219–221 n° 198; *Burns R.* Monuments de Syrie. Guide historique. Damascus, 1998, p. 229–230.

³ List of the relics preserved in Altavaux by 1180, published in *Leroux A.* Documents historiques bas-latins, provençaux et français concernant principalement la Marche et le Limousin. Limoges, 1883, I, p. 84.

⁴ *Relatio Guidonis Chat de miraculo Beate Marie Virginis in Sardena* [c. 1186] / Ed. P. Devos. Les premières versions occidentales de la légende de Saidnaia // *An. Boll.* 65 (1947), p. 245–278, esp. 272–273.

⁵ *Kedar B. Z.* Convergences of Oriental Christian, Muslim and Frankish Worshippers: The Case of Saidnaya and the Knights Templar // *The Crusades and the Military Orders: Expanding the Frontier of Medieval Latin Christianity*. In memoriam Sir Steven Runciman (1903–2000) / Ed. Z. Hunyadi and J. Laszlofsky. Budapest, 2001, p. 89–100; *Hamilton B.* Our Lady of Saidnaia: An Orthodox Shrine Revered by Muslims and Knights Templar at the Time of the Crusades // *The Holy Land, Holy Lands, and Christian History*. Papers Read at the 1998 Summer Meeting and the 1999 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society / Ed. R. N. Swanson. Woodbridge, 2000, p. 207–215.

Roger of Wendover's *Flores historiarum* (ca. 1231)⁶ and Gautier de Coincy's *Miracles de Nostre Dame* (ca. 1250)⁷, who witness that Templar convents in the West often housed phials of the icon's sweat; nonetheless, other major institutions, such as Canterbury Cathedral⁸, the abbey of Cluny⁹, or Saint-Médard in Soissons¹⁰, boasted of analogous mementoes.

We can imagine that the Templars and other Crusaders had discovered the shrine during their campaigns against Moslems in Syria and might have stimulated the pilgrims from the West to carry on as far as the neighborhoods of Damascus (which was, however, an important goal by itself because of its association with the memory of Saint Paul's deeds). However, Burchard of Strasbourg, who has transmitted to us the earliest surviving description of Saydnaya in ca. 1175, was neither a pilgrim nor a Templar friar: he had been allowed to visit Syria during a diplomatic mission to Damascus on behalf of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, and his Muslim counterparts had probably been quite interested in showing him that shrine served by a Christian community, since it might be advantageous on political grounds¹¹. But why that place could look so special to Western eyes?

Before answering this question, it is worth mentioning that Saydnaya is still flourishing and constitutes an important cult-centre for both Christians and Muslims of present-day Syria. William Dalrymple, a writer and journalist of our time, described it in its novel-report *From the Holy Mountain* (1994), and his words proved to be not less touching than those of his predecessors of the 12th and 14th centuries: he speaks of a monastery ruled by Orthodox nuns where Muslim worshippers are even more numerous than Christians¹². As Bernard Hamilton has emphasized, our ancestors shared our modern inability to understand Islamic tolerance and even more that phenomenon of cultural and religious *métissage* being so typical of Levantine countries¹³. Latin authors, such as William of Tyre, hardly understood why Muslim believers used to go on pilgrimage to such Christian churches as the basilica of Bethlehem and the cathedral of Our Lady in Tortosa (Tartūs) in

⁶ Roger of Wendover. *Flores historiarum* / Ed. H. G. Hewlett. London, 1886–1889, II, p. 6.

⁷ Gautier de Coincy. *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame* / Ed. V. F. Koenig. Geneva, 1970, IV, p. 378–411 ('De l'ymage Nostre Dame de Sardanei').

⁸ Dart J. *The History and Antiquities of the Cathedral Church of Canterbury, and the Once-Adjoining Monastery*. London, 1726, appendix, p. 47.

⁹ As witnessed by Vansleb J.-M. *Histoire de l'Église d'Alexandrie*. Paris, 1677, p. 158–159.

¹⁰ As related in Gautier de Coincy's poem, vv. 614–617 (ed. Koenig, p. 401).

¹¹ Burchard of Strasbourg. *De statu Egypti vel Babylonie* [c. 1175], 6 / Ed. De Sandoli // *Itinera Hierosolymitana Crucesignatorum* (saec. XI–XIII). Jerusalem, 1979–1984, II, p. 46; *Les premières versions* / Ed. Devos, p. 265–266.

¹² Dalrymple W. *From the Holy Mountain*. London, 1994.

¹³ Hamilton, *Our Lady of Saydnaya*, as in note 5. Cf. also Meri J. W. *The Cult of Saints Among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria*. Oxford, 2002, p. 210–212.

Crusader-ruled territories, but they were even more puzzled at seeing that similar phenomena did exist well within Mamlūk countries. All this was so illogical that one could only suppose that God had granted a special grace to those holy places; according to the chronicler Albericus *de Tribus Fontibus*, writing in the first half of the 13th century, three were the churches in the Levant which «defended themselves miraculously», i. e. against destruction by Muslims: that of Bethlehem, that of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, and that of Saydnaya¹⁴.

Divine favour was immediately evident to pilgrims coming to Saydnaya from Damascus. Even if it was only ten or twelve miles far from the Syrian capital (it's actually 22 kilometers north-east of the town), the landscape was completely different. Instead of a desert and plain place, they saw abundant vegetation and water: near the village, writes Brother James of Verona in 1322, laid a magnificent source which quenched the thirst of both men and animals¹⁵. Westerners noticed and appreciated the great deal of vineyards encircling the built-up area: in fact, the natives used to drink wine as in Europe, and of course this wine couldn't but taste like nectar especially to Italian pilgrims, being compelled to abstemiousness during that trip inside an Islamic country. Because of the high quality of wines in the village, some visitors supposed that local grapewines descended from the archetypal graft planted by Noah after the Flood¹⁶. They also remarked that even Muslims allowed themselves a wine glass during their stay in Saydnaya¹⁷.

Most of all, the followers of Mohammed's creed couldn't but stay for a while in that village, since by virtue of God's grace (as pilgrims told) they were not allowed to live there for more than one year¹⁸. The resident population was composed only of Christians, although of different obedience, such as Melkites (by far the outstanding community), Western Syrians or Jacobites, Maronites, and Nestorians; compared with other Christians in the area, they were to be reputed lucky, since they not only could take advantage of a fertile

¹⁴ Albericus *de Tribus fontibus*. Chronicon // Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Germanicarum. Hannover, 1826, XXIII, p. 935–936. On Saidnaya as a pilgrimage goal cf. Weyl Carr A. Icons and the Object of Pilgrimage in Middle Byzantine Constantinople // DOP 56 (2002), p. 75–92, esp. 88–89.

¹⁵ James of Verona. Liber peregrinationis [1335] / Ed. U. Monneret de Villard // Liber Peregrinationis di Jacopo da Verona. Rome, 1950, p. 136–137.

¹⁶ Surius B. Le Pieux Pelerin ou Voyage de Ierusalem. Bruxelles, 1666, p. 342.

¹⁷ Magister Thietmar. Peregrinatio [1217–1218]. Version preserved in the 14th-century Codex Hamburgensis 143b / Ed. J. C. M. Laurent // Mag. Thietmari Peregrinatio ad fidem codicis Hamburgensis. Hamburgi, 1857, p. 19.

¹⁸ This often-repeated story is first mentioned by Thietmar (ed. Laurent, p. 19), followed by Friar Filippo Busserio in 1283 (ed. De Sandoli, *Itinera*, IV, p. 250) and the Anonymus of ca. 1290 (ed. M. L. Colker. A Mediaeval Pilgrim's Guide // Classical, Mediaeval, and Renaissance Studies in Honor of Berthold Louis Ullman / Ed. Ch. Henderson. Rome, 1964, II, p. 93–143, esp. 141).

soil and a luxuriant nature, but also were allowed to freely worship Christ and His Most Holy Mother. Such an Eden, such a fragment of Paradise on earth was consecrated by the fortified monastery which commanded it over a pinnacle of rock. This building, too, looked familiar to Western pilgrims, because of both its location on the top of a hill and its being covered with tiles: visitors from Tuscany, such as Giorgio Gucci and Lionardo Frescobaldi in 1384¹⁹, were greatly struck by this device, which reminded them of the architectural practices of their native country.

The monastery was inhabited by both nuns and monks. The earliest sources not always provide us with clear information about their religious affiliation: even if scholars have most often emphasized the dominant role of the Melkite church throughout the history of Saydnaya, some Medieval texts seem to hint at a cohabitation of Byzantine (i. e. Greek-speaking) and Syrian clergy²⁰; the hagiographic telling of the icon, which counters a pious Syrian woman with an ambiguous Constantinopolitan monk, may indeed suggest a direct contrast between the two communities. What should retain our attention here is that, notwithstanding the presence of Greek *calogeri* inside the monastery, only the Syrian nuns were entitled to manage the shrine and the cult-practices taking place there.

The pilgrimage to the monastery church consisted of a long-lasting and progressive approach march to the icon, being preserved in the holiest of holies of the katholikon. Visitors were expected to climb the pinnacle of rock by walking up on a steep stairway; when they arrived at the top, they entered the monastery through a very small entrance and went across an open space which reminded them of an Italian *piazza*. From there they entered the narthex, which was shaped as a porticus or *trasanna*, as Western pilgrims called it, supported by four pillars and reminded them of a country summerhouse²¹. At last, they gained access to the main door. The church interior probably looked like a traditional Latin building of the basilican type, consisting of three naves separated by twelve columns; its dimensions were huge and so sensibly differed from the often diminutive churches held by Orthodox Christians in the Levant. Step by step they approached the choir, which was delimited by a templon-like struc-

¹⁹ See the texts edited by A. Lanza — M. Troncarelli. *Pellegrini scrittori. Viaggiatori toscani del Trecento in Terrasanta*. Firenze, 1990, p. 210, 299.

²⁰ The sources often speak of “Syrian nuns” and “Greek monks”; the terms *Surianus*, *suriano* or *siriano* usually hint at the Syro-Melkite community, although they can be eventually used also for the Jacobites; Lionardo Frescobaldi (ed. Lanza-Troncarelli, p. 210–211) indeed describes the nuns as “Christians of the Girdle”, a term being used for both Melkites (especially in Egypt) and Jacobites or Western Syrians. Cf. von den Brincken A.-D. *Die “Nationes Christianorum orientaliū” im Verständnis der lateinischen Historiographie von der Mitte des 12. bis in die zweite Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts*. Köln–Wien, 1973, p. 76–103.

²¹ Joos van Ghistele. *Tvoyage van Mher [1485]* / Ed. R. J. G. A. A. Gaspar // Ambrosius Zeebout. *Tvoyage van Mher Joos van Ghistele*. Hilversum: Verloren, 1998, p. 301–302.

ture (perhaps a kind of palaeochristian prostoon or schola cantorum): it was not a common transversal iconostasis, since the Flemish traveller Joos van Ghisele witnessed that the “cisterns” for the blessed water were located close to each of its corners. From the same source we learn that “a small chapel” of semicircular shape lay behind the presbyterium and access to it could be gained through two doors on the choir sides. The sacredness of the holy place was first manifested to visitors by the great number of lamps reputed to burn the whole day and the whole night. A very beautiful lamp hanged in front of a niche framed by a border made with gold lieves, mother-of-pearl ornaments, jaspers, serpentines, and other precious materials: such an accumulation of ornaments revealed that a most holy object, i.e. a miraculous icon displaying the Virgin and Child, was preserved within the apse wall (fig. 1)²².

Although the 12th century writer Burchard of Strasbourg wrote that, although nobody was allowed to touch its surface, pilgrims could obtain to see the icon unveiled²³, all of the later visitors witnessed that it was almost impossible to see it, since the niche was secured with a grating and was covered with cloths, and lots of candles, lamps, and ex-votos hanging in front of it; somebody even said that almost nothing remained of the originary painting, since the paint had turned into flesh (at least from the waist upwards) and from its breasts the holy sweat or oil (sometimes described also as milk) ran down the portion of wall below and filled a marble basin.

A French illuminated manuscript of Gautier de Coincy's *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, dated ca. 1411–1412 and attributed to the so-called ‘Master of Marshal Boucicault's Hours’, may be of help in understanding how pilgrims were involved in the aura of spatial sacredness created by the special nature of the Saydnaya icon (fig. 2)²⁴. One of the visitors is approaching the church but is still outside, another one is entering and respectfully putting off his hat; one of the nuns will allow him to get inside the holy bema (being bounded by the chancel screen on the right). When entering the bema, the pilgrim is requested to kneel down in front of the holy icon, which another nun is going to unveil to him: it is represented as a painted panel of the Virgin and Child, walled up in-

²² Ibidem, p. 302: “...ten hende staet den choor, ende over elke zijde es eene cisterne daer eeuwelic water in es, goet ghedroncken jeghens de cortsen zo de religieusen zegghen. Item in dese zelve keercke achter den choor staet een cappellekin, half ront wesende, int welke men commen mach van tween zijden van uut den choore, ende dat hanct altijts vul lampten, bernende nacht ende dach. In midden zo staet een maniere van eenen wijnwater steene van witten marberen, daer inne dat ooc altoos eene groote bernende lampte es, ende recht daer vooren zo staet een viercandt masier gat inden muer ghemetst, vooren met eender yserin trailge, sluitende met tween bladeren van metale verguldt. De boorden vander veinsteren ende masiere zijn zeer zuverlic ghewracht ende ghesneden van moeder van peerlen, van jaspis, van serpentin steenen ende meer andere, in twelcke veinsterkin ofte masiergat zo es een vanden vier beelden van Maria, dat de heleghe evangeliste Sente Luuc ghemaect heeft naer der ghelijcke van Marien...”.

²³ Burchard of Strasbourg, as in note 11.

²⁴ *Sterling Ch. La peinture médiévale à Paris 1300–1500*. Paris, 1987, vol. I, fig. 262.

side a niche, which is imbued with the miraculous liquid filling the basin below. The illuminator, who is working out a faithful interpretation of Gautier de Coincy's poem, stresses the visual element as a means of establishing a relationship between the image and its beholder. Admittedly, Gautier relied on the earliest sources which told that the image was actually shown to visitors; nonetheless, no text seems to provide exact descriptions of how the image looked like: according to Anba Mikhaïl, a Coptic Bishop of Damietta quoted by the Arabic writer Abū 'l-Makārim in 1183, it was of "pale red" colour²⁵; Guy Chat heard that it was "sculpted", or better "carved" in a wooden panel²⁶; Mathew Paris imagined that it was painted "in the Greek manner"²⁷; all other authors spoke of a medium-size painted icon representing the Virgin and Child "from the waist upwards" (what is a kind of standard description of Byzantine holy images). In 1336 Wilhelm von Boldensele remarked that almost nothing remained of the ancient surface:

[...] you can see a dark and damp panel, where they say that was once painted the image of the glorious Virgin Mary, but because of its ancientness you cannot recognize anything of Her features, even if it seemed to me that there appeared some fragments of red colour²⁸.

Nonetheless, Ludolph of Sūdheim in 1341²⁹ and Ulrich Leman in 1473³⁰ reported that the image represented the Virgin Mary suckling the Child. This

²⁵ *Abū al-Makārim*. Ta'rikh al-kana'is [1190–1191] / Ed. S. al-Suryānī // Ta'rikh al-kanā'is wa-l-adyirah fī al-qarn al-thānī 'ashar al-milādī li-'Abī al-Makārim. Cairo, 1984, III, p. 72–74.

²⁶ *Relatio Guidonis Chat* / Ed. Devos. Les premières versions, p. 272: "ychoniam sculptam in sancte Dei genitricis honore".

²⁷ *Mathew Paris*. Itineraire de Londres a Jerusalem [c. 1244] / Ed. De Sandoli // Itinera, III, p. 514: "une ymage peinte de Nostre Dame of sun enfant à ovre grezesche".

²⁸ *Wilhelm von Boldensele*. Hodoeporicon ad Terram Sanctam [1336] / Ed. H. Canisius-I. Basnage // Thesaurus monumentorum ecclesiasticorum et historicorum. Amsterdam, 1725, IV, p. 335–357, esp. 356: "Retro maius altare ipsius in muro tabula quaedam retro nigra et humida cernitur, in qua imago gloriosae Virginis olim depicta fuisse asseritur, sed propter vetustatem nihil de lineamentis figurae distinguitur in eadem, nisi quod aliqua parte color rubeus mihi videbatur aliquantulum apparere".

²⁹ *Ludolph of Sūdheim*. De itinere Terrae Sanctae (1335–1341) / Ed. F. Deycks (Ludolphi, rectoris ecclesiae parochialis in Suchem, de itinere Terrae Sanctae liber. Nach alten Handschriften berichtet herausgegeben). Stuttgart, 1851, p. 99–101: "In hoc monasterio... pulchra est ecclesia, in qua retro altare in muro in quodam arcu semicirculari stat imago beatae Mariae in tabula lignea, quasi lactans filium, ab umbilico sursum est depicta et cancellis ferreis praemunita; sed est tota nigra prae vetustate et osculis effecta, quod vix imago fuisse discerni potest, sed modicum rubei coloris adhuc cernitur in vestimentis depictis".

³⁰ *Ulrich Leman*. Wallfahrt nach Jerusalem [1473] / Ed. R. Röhrich, H. Meisner // Deutsche Pilgerreisen nach dem Heiligen Lande. Berlin, 1880, p. 105–106: "in der selben kilchen hinder dem altar in ainer mur ist unser frowen bildnuss gemalat in ainem halben schwibogen und ain aner hultziner taffel gemalat, wie sy ir kind sogt, ob der gurtal hinuff, hat och Sant Luc gemalat".

device would confirm the theory of Lucy-Ann Hunt, who has proposed to identify the Saydnaya type with that of the Galaktotrophousa³¹. Such an authoritative archetype may indeed explain why nursing Virgins are to be found quite often in churches of the area: in the rock-cut chapel of Saydet-Naya near Kfar Chlaiman in Northern Lebanon she is represented enthroned in a 13th century fresco located on the eastern wall near the altar (maybe replicating the setting of the icon in its shrine?)³²; the same subject appears also in the Melkite church at Qar'a, Syria³³, where the setting below an arch may hint at the actual shape of the Saydnaya niche, which, according to Ludolph of Südheim, ended in a semi-circular arch. However, I am convinced that we can share Hunt's proposal only if we admit that beholders (and painters making copies of the image) were obviously disposed to attribute a strong maternal identity to a sacred object which was reputed to emanate a life-giving liquid from its incarnated breasts. But this doesn't mean that the Saydnaya icon actually looked like this, since one may think that it didn't look at all, or that it was meant to be kept concealed to profane eyes, exactly as it was meant to be kept away from profane hands. By the way, it is worth stressing that nursing women played an important role in the traditional imagery of both Christian and Muslim communities in Syria, as witnessed, for example,

³¹ *Hunt L.-A.* A Woman's Prayer to St. Sergios in Latin Syria: Interpreting a Thirteenth-Century Icon at Mount Sinai // *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 15 (1991), p. 96–145 (119–121). The association to the Galaktotrophousa type was first formulated by *Nasrallah J.* La Vierge Hodigitria (la Vierge Conductrice ou al-Hadia) // *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 38 (1988), p. 238–254. On the importance of the maternal side in the traditions of the Christian East cf. *Van Moorsel P.* Die stillende Gottesmutter und die Monophysiten // *Kunst und Geschichte Nubiens in christlicher Zeit. Ergebnisse und Probleme auf Grund der jüngsten Ausgrabungen* / Ed. E. Dinkler. Recklinghausen, 1970, p. 281–290, and, more recently, *Dodd E. Cruikshank.* Christian Arab Sources for the Madonna Allattante in Italy // *Arte medievale*, n. s., II/2, 2003, p. 33–39.

³² *Voisin L. Nordiguiant-J.-C.* Châteaux et églises du Moyen Âge au Liban. Beirut, 1999, p. 307–308 and 392–393; *Dodd E. Cruikshank.* Medieval Painting in the Lebanon. Wiesbaden, 2004, p. 43, 306–314. It is necessary to stress that the cave church is not orientated and the altar is located on the south wall; nonetheless, the fresco displaying the Virgin Galaktotrophousa lies very close to the altar.

³³ On the frescoes at Qar'a, usually dated to the 12th century, cf. *Leroy J.* Découverte de peintures chrétiennes en Syrie // *Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes* 25 (1975), p. 95–113, esp. 95–106; *Zibawi M.* Orienti cristiani. Senso e storia di un'arte tra Bisanzio e l'Islam. Milan, 1995, p. 92 and colour plate 19; *Velmans T., Korać V., Šuput M.* Bisanzio. Lo splendore dell'arte monumentale. Milan, 1999, p. 63; *Westphalen S.* Byzantinisierende Wandmalereien in Syrien // *Byzantinische Malerei. Bildprogramme-Ikono-graphie-Stil. Symposium in Marburg vom 25.–29.6.1997* / Ed. G. Koch. Wiesbaden, 2000, p. 387–403; *Dodd E. Cruikshank.* The Frescoes of Mar Musa al-Habashi. A Study in Medieval Painting in Syria. Toronto, 2001, p. 110; *Eadem*, Christian Arab Sources, passim.

by a series of enigmatic ceramic figures produced in Islamic milieu of the area in the 12th and 13th century³⁴.

Scholars have stressed that the location of the image in a niche on the apse wall is almost unique in the Orthodox world (such rare instances as the painted niche behind the altar in the Franco-Byzantine church of Lyso in Cyprus is itself indebted, as Annemarie Weyl Carr has noticed, to the model of Saydnaya³⁵). We shouldn't forget, however, that the monastery is situated in Syria, and that concealing sacred objects inside the walls of a church is something traditional in Syrian Christianity; and we have some evidence that important relics (such as the Baptist's hair in a Nestorian monastery in Qanqal, Iraq) could be walled up in the apse, behind the altar, i. e. in the place held by the Bishop's throne in the times past³⁶. This detail should be taken into account, since it may explain why the icon proves to be so cruel against the high clergy: according to Eastern sources, such as the Ethiopian versions of the Saydnaya legend³⁷ and the accurate report by Vassilij Grigorevič Barskij³⁸, when patriarchs, metropolitans, archbishops or even priests had tried to transfer the image to another place, notwithstanding the nuns' reluctance, they immediately became paralysed or even died within few days. In other words, the icon's location within the true auratic centre of the building epitomized Saydnaya's status as an extraordinary and independent holy place, being subject solely to the Virgin Mary.

The close relationship of the icon with the sacred space housing it was clearly expressed by its translation legend. A monk from Constantinople had

³⁴ Cf. *L'Orient de Saladin*. L'art des Ayyoubides. Exhibition catalogue. Paris, 2001, p. 156, n°138.

³⁵ Carr A. W. Byzantines and Italians on Cyprus: Images from Art // DOP 49 (1995), p. 339–357, esp. 348–352. The Saydnaya cult actually happened to be exported by Syrians into Cyprus, as witnessed by a 16th century icon labeled 'the Mother of God of Saydnaya' in the church of the Archangel Michael in Phrenaros: cf. Papageorgiou A. Syrie et les icônes de Chypre. Peintres syriens à Chypre // Report of the Department of Antiquities. Cyprus, 1989, p. 171–176.

³⁶ See Fiey J.-M. La vie mouvementée des reliques dans l'Orient syriaque // Parole de l'Orient 13 (1986), p. 183–196 (187–188).

³⁷ *Ethiopian Synnassary* [late 16th century] / Ed. G. Colin // PO 43/3, p. 385–387. The Ethiopian church is accustomed to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Saydnaya on 10 Maskaram; cfr. Cerulli E. Il libro etiopico dei Miracoli di Maria. Rome, 1943, p. 231–289. The story of the Saydnaya icon has also been represented as an enthroned Hodegetria by a Venetian illuminator (Nicola Brancalion) working in Ethiopia in ca. 1508–1520: cf. Monneret de Villard U. La Madonna di S. Maria Maggiore e l'illustrazione dei Miracoli di Maria in Abissinia // Annali lateranensi 11 (1947), p. 9–90, esp. 57–62, and Chojnacki S. Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting. Indigenous Developments, the Influence of Foreign Models and Their Adaptation from the 13th to the 19th Century. Wiesbaden, 1983, p. 393–395.

³⁸ Barskij V. B. Странствования Василья Григоровича Барскаго по Святымъ местамъ Востока. Ч. II 1728–1744 гг. Sankt Peterburg, 1886, p. 105–109. I owe this reference to Alexei M. Lidov. Most interestingly, Barskij witnesses that a miracle being equivalent to that of the 'Holy Fire' in Jerusalem actually took place also in Saydnaya, at the same moment as the most famous one within the Holy Sepulchre.

promised to buy it on behalf of a pious Syrian nun who had given hospitality to him in Saydnaya; he did buy the image, but when he realized that it performed miracles, he decided to take it away to his own monastery. However, he stopped again in Saydnaya and as soon as he entered the church he was no more able to find the exit, since he couldn't see any door, but only a nude wall; and the door appeared again whenever he laid down the icon. Then he realized that God wanted the icon to remain there, and the nun put it immediately within the niche behind the altar, and secured it with a grating, and she didn't forget to cover it with cloths and light it with lamps. As soon as the icon was located there, it turned into flesh and started pouring oil from its breasts, and the wall was soon soaked with that holy liquid; that's why she decided to put the basin below³⁹.

The image was now a human body, concealed and housed within a greater, architectural body which protected it as a child in her mother's womb. Believers were expected to have a feeling that a living being was hidden inside the apse wall, beneath the multiple layers of objects hanging before the grating; the Mother of God's presence was not evoked by Her icon's external appearance and iconography, but by a secretion of Her body running down the wall. The ritualized approach of pilgrims to the bema ended when one of the nuns put her hand through the grating to collect some liquid within a spoon; she then turned back to the kneeling believer and anointed his forehead, temple, and chest with that holy oil⁴⁰. In this way, he

³⁹ On the history of the Saydnaya legend and its Arabic, Latin, and Romance versions cf. *Raynaud G.* Le miracle de Sardenai // *Romania* 11 (1882), p. 519–537; *Idem*, Le miracle de Sardenai (article complémentaire) // *Romania* 14 (1885), p. 82–93; *Cheiko L.* “Khabr iqūnat Saidnāyā al-‘jibah” // *al-Machriq* 8 (1905), p. 461–468; *Peeters P.* La légende de Saidnaia // *An. Boll.* 25 (1906), p. 137–157; *Idem*, review of Zayyat. Ta’rikh Saidnāyā // *An. Boll.* 51 (1933), p. 435–438; *Graf G.* Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur. I: Die Übersetzungen. Città del Vaticano, 1944, p. 256–257; *Devos*, Les premières versions, passim; *Dawkins R. M.* The Icon of Sardenai // *Παγκαρπεία*. Mélanges Henri Grégoire. Bruxelles, 1949 (= “Annales de l’Institut de philologie et d’histoire orientales et slaves” 9), I, p. 135–144; *Minervini L.* Leggenda dei cristiani orientali nelle letterature romanze del Medioevo // *Romance Philology* 49 (1995), p. 1–12; *Baraz D.* The Incarnated Icon of Saidnaya Goes West. A Re-Examination of the Motif in the Light of New Manuscript Evidence // *Le Muséon* 108 (1995), p. 181–191.

⁴⁰ The rite is best described by the skeptical words of the Flemish voyager Bertrandon de la Broquière in 1432–1433: “Toutesfois, quant je y fus, on me monstra tout au bout de l’église, derriere le grant autel, ainsy que une fenestre dedans le mur, en laquelle je veis ladite ymaige, une chose plate; et peut avoir ung pié et demy de long et ung de large. S’elle est de bois ou de pierre je ne sçay, car elle est toute couverte de drapeaulx et sy a une traille de fer au devant. Et aubout de ceste table, y a ung petit vaisseau où il y a de l’uyle. Là vint une femme qui me vult faire la croix sur le front, aux temples et en la poitrine qui, à tout ung cuillier d’argent, mesla lesdictz drapeaulx et me samble que c’est ung pratique pour avoir argent, non obstant que je ne veulx point dire que Nostre Dame n’ait plus grant puissance que ceste n’ait” (*Le Voyage d’Outremer de Bertrandon de la Broquière* / Ed. Ch. Schefer. Paris 1892, p. 64–66). Cf. *Peers G.* Sacred Shock. Framing Visual Experience in

was physically involved into the holiness of that place, since he was lead to experience an individual and even bodily relationship with an invisible sacred object whose auratic power was created by the interaction of rite and space within an ingeniously built-up setting.

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САКРАЛЬНОЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВО ДЛЯ СВЯТОЙ ИКОНЫ:
СВЯТИЛИЩЕ БОГОМАТЕРИ САИДНОЙ

Монастырь Богородицы Саидной, расположенный в 22 км к востоку от Дамаска, все еще остается одним из самых важных культовых центров современной Сирии; несмотря на то, что он населен и управляется христианскими (т. е. греко-православными) монахинями, его церковь, в которой хранится знаменитая икона Богородицы, ежедневно посещается множеством мусульман. Монастырь известен с конца XII века и долгое время был важным пунктом в маршрутах многих паломников как с христианского Востока, так и из Западной Европы. И это при том, что, в отличие от прочих почитаемых мест Святой Земли, он не связан ни с одной реликвией или важным эпизодом из Евангелия, а также не мог похвастаться фигурой основателя, который был бы важным представителем раннехристианского монашества. Статус «святого места», которым обладала Сайднейя, являлся прямым следствием святости ее иконы, которая, как считалось, освящала все пространство вокруг себя. Это относилось не только к церкви и всему монастырю, построенным на вершине скалы, но и располагавшейся у ее подножия деревне. Все это прославлялось как благословенные Господом места, где росли виноград и прочие растения и было множество воды. Там позволялось жить только христианам, так как считалось, что если там осмелятся поселиться мусульмане, то они погибнут в течении одного года.

Природная среда в Сайднейе (т. е. сочетание невиданного плодородия с каменистой и песчаной пустыней) играли важную роль в создании ореола святости этого пространства, так как у посетителей складывалось впечатление, что они попали в подобие Эдема, которому покровительствует Господь. Средоточием комплекса была главная церковь внутри монастырских стен, чьим ядром было святилище, в кото-

Byzantium. University Park, 2004, p. 133: The incarnated icon of Saidnaya is indicated by this author as a special case of “attendance, even consanguineity with divinity”, being a consequence of the role played by the frame in disintegrating the distance “that theoretically separates image and model”.

ром хранилась икона. По-видимому, современное ее состояние — результат основательной перестройки, но все же представить убранство и обстановку церкви можно благодаря множеству описаний европейских и христианско-арабских паломников XII–XVII вв., а также благодаря сборникам описаний чудес Богородицы на нескольких языках (включая латынь, старофранцузский, испанский, арабский и эфиопский). Эти источники содержат ценную информацию о внешнем виде и устройстве здания, которые постепенно вовлекали паломников в сакральное пространство с помощью тщательно разработанного ритуала поклонения святой иконе.

Прежде всего, паломник должен был подняться на сайднайский холм и войти в ворота монастыря, затем он проходил через площадь и крытый портик и приближался к дверям церкви. Само здание было довольно большим и в плане представляло собой базилику, состоящую из центрального и двух боковых нефов, разделенных шестью колоннами. После прохождения всего центрального нефа паломник должен был остановиться перед алтарными воротами перед тем, как ему позволялось пройти дальше. Монахи или монахини должны были провести его в особое пространство за алтарем, где его просили преклониться перед местом, где, как сообщалось, находилась икона. Согласно источникам, покрытый множеством покровов образ хранился в расположенной в восточной стене углублении-нише, защищенной железной решеткой. Чудотворное масло, исходящее иконой, стекало по стене и наполняло мраморную чашу внизу. Монахи или монахини просовывали руки через решетку, собирали чудотворное масло и совершали помазание паломников. Таким образом посетители эмоционально и материально приобщались к святости места.

Икона пользовалась такой высокой репутацией из-за того, что считалось, что она сделана из человеческой плоти. Согласно местным преданиям, она обрела плоть, когда монах из Константинополя отказался передать ее настоятельнице монастыря. В этот момент двери храма сами собой закрылись и не открывались, пока икона не была помещена в нишу за алтарем. Затем, желая выразить желание остаться в этих стенах, икона сотворила чудо — поверхность иконы обратилась в нежную кожу, и над ее плоскостью поднялась грудь, источающая чудотворное масло. Святая икона действительно замещала тело Богородицы, и все сакральное пространство вокруг нее было пронизано этим телесным присутствием: церковные стены увлажнились ее святой влагой, двери защищали ее, сама она была помещена внутри апсиды за алтарем в особом помещении, как дитя в лоне матери.

По общему признанию, такое место расположения иконы в православном храме было довольно странным. Нам известны случаи, когда

святые иконы Богоматери помещались внутри вимы, среди них «Панагия Ойкокира» в Фаросском храме Большого дворца в Константинополе. Однако подобное размещение гораздо более традиционно для святилищ Запада, где живописные образы обычно ассоциируются с алтарем. Начиная с XI в. также встречаются, хоть и редко, расписанные ниши или углубления, содержащие доски или скульптуры. Так как некоторые интересные примеры такого рода могут быть обнаружены в католических зданиях Ближнего Востока и на Кипре, мы предполагаем, что такая практика возникла под влиянием крестоносцев. В любом случае стоит отметить, что устройство, сознательно повторяющее Сайднайское, было найдено учеными в ряде церквей Восточного Средиземноморья, например в церкви Панагии Хрисоелеусы в Лиси на Кипре (как показала Аннамари Вейль Карр). Другие святилища, такие как пещерный храм в Saydet-Naya в Kfar Chlaiman в Ливане, могли быть построены по похожим схемам.

Воспроизведение сакрального пространства Сайднайи было следствием ее широкой известности среди паломников-христиан как Запада, так и Востока. В Европе XIII–XIV веков были распространены реликварии с чудотворным маслом. По одной гипотезе, поклонение *Madonna Damascena* на Родосе и позднее на Мальте в рыцарском орденах госпитальеров напоминало культ сайднайской иконы. Более того, можно предположить, что распространение иконографического типа Богоматери Млекопитательницы также было стимулировано этим феноменом, так как святая икона обычно идентифицировалась как кормящая Дева Мария. Анализ сохранившихся иллюстраций *Miracle de la Vierge de Sardenai* или *Sardaneke* (как она была обычно известна старофранцузским паломникам) в западных манускриптах позднего средневековья может оказаться крайне полезным для восстановления иконографии образа, а также тех культовых практик, в которых он принимал участие. На деле они обычно изображали не просто внешний вид иконы, а культовую обстановку сирийского святилища. История «воплощенной иконы» Сайднайи также является источником распространенной легенды о «сарацине, обращенном образом Девы Марии в христианство». Она повествует о том, как мусульманин присвоил икону Богоматери и поместил ее в нише своего дома. Он относился к ней с почтением и поклонялся ей, но все еще не мог поверить в догмат Воплощения. Чудесным образом икона обратилась в плоть, и убежденный этим сарацин решил перейти в христианство. Эта легенда воспроизводит и связь иконы со стеной здания, и топос воплощения; возможно, она возникла под влиянием того факта, что местные мусульмане чтили Сайднайскую икону, чем поражали западных пилигримов, воспринимавших это как проявление особой благодати, которой Бог одарил святое место.



1. The present setting of the icon. Saidnaya Monastery, Syria.



2. Pilgrims to the Saidnaya icon. Master of the Boucicault Hours, miniature illustrating one of Gautier de Coincy's "Miracles de Notre Dame", ca. 1411–1412. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. Fr. 2810, f. 171v.