The Archangel Michael

Joanna Lace

This is a copy of an article which appeared in *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. VIII, No.1 (Christmas 2001), pp.45–50, 116. *Treasures of Malta* is published three times a year by Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, and this copy appears with permission of the editors.

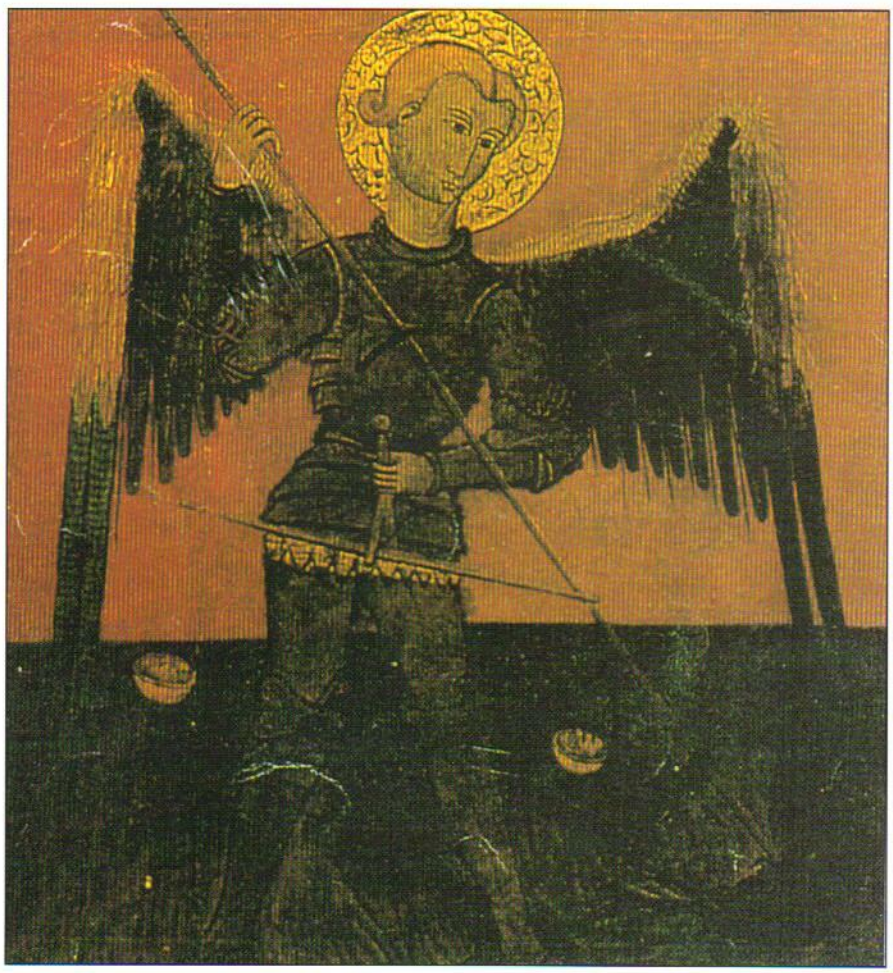
THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL

JOANNA LACE writes about an ancient panel in the Cathedral Museum which may have formed part of an altarpiece

The Archangel Michael is the subject of one of a set of three small painted panels of the Valencian School now in the Cathedral Museum, Mdina.[1] (*Fig. 1*) Michael is often identified, as here, by the presence of a pair of scales. These are the scales of the Last Judgment: that awesome moment before the Gate of Heaven, when God's most illustrious archangel will perform his task of weighing each deceased man's soul in order to reveal its true worth. The Mdina Michael combines the weighing with another sacred task, to protect us against Evil. Thus, in one dramatic design, we are reminded of two facets of his activity: while operating the scales with his left hand, in his right hand he holds a lance, with which he deftly despatches a dragon (i.e. Evil) at his feet. That is, as God's intermediary, he both "weighs" men's souls, and by defeating the devil, he defends them from harm.

The aim of this short essay is to convey something of the enormous wealth of legendary material that lies behind this composite image, and its place within the wider concept of the Last Judgment. A brief outline of the very varying impact some of the ancient texts had upon succeeding generations of Christian exegetes, will show in turn how these differences have been expressed in the art repertoire.

A useful first line of enquiry concerns the ancient origins of 'angels' (from the Greek *angelos*, – messenger) and archangels (from the Greek *archos*, – chief). This concept of invisible beings in constant activity between God and man has been common throughout the centuries to all the great religions stemming from the Middle East. The angelology of the dualist religion Zoroastrianism was well-developed, with good angels and bad angels in constant battle. Zoroastrian thinking is reflected in ancient sources that include, besides the Hebrew Bible, other Jewish, Christian, and gnostic extra-biblical texts.[2] Angelology, in fact, is a vast subject, beyond the scope of this essay; suffice it to say that recent research supports the theory that the Jews came



(Fig. 1) The Archangel Michael, painted panel, Valencian school; Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Malta.

under Zoroastrian influence during the exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C., and that it was at that period that they were moved to develop their own doctrine concerning angels. For them angels were benevolent, attendants at the Heavenly Court of the one true God; their roles included the worship of God, the conveying of His Divine Will to earth, and as warrior angels, to fight against evil doers and safeguard the righteous – they are known collectively as the "hosts", who make up the army of the "Lord of Hosts".

This is where we meet the warrior Archangel Michael, for he is the chief among the warriors, God's mightiest defender of man against evil, Guardian of Israel, his name meaning "Who is like God?". All Archangels are high-ranking leaders of the angelic host, but it was Michael who became the most famous and enduring, the Great Prince and patron of Israel.[3]

Such was his popularity, scholars now suggest, that in areas of Jewish settlement, for example in western Asia Minor, shrines originally serving pagan cults were made over to Michael. The shrine of the god Attis at Collossae (later Chonae) is an example that deserves a brief mention here. The cult of Attis had been associated with mountains and with springs; also, some pre-Christian Jewish texts[4] ascribed an angel to each natural phenomenon, such as fire, wind, darkness etc., and Michael's special concern was with water – water as life-giving rain, as rivers, as springs. Thus a transition would not have been difficult in a popular context and Michael the Chief Warrior was henceforth venerated for his powers of healing. Thus it was, with the spread of his popularity to the Christian West, we find shrines to Michael are in fact on mountain tops, and in caves where water trickled out of the rock – from Monte Gargano in Italy, to Mont Saint-Michel in France, and St. Michael's Mount in England.

This mention of Michael's early popularity brings us into the Christian world, to Egypt, where he was especially venerated by the Coptic Christians. In fact some sixth-century paintings by Coptic Artists are the earliest of the Archangel Michael to have survived. As single devotional images we meet the Michael of the Mdina panel with sword and scales (*Fig.* 2); sometimes, below Michael, a tiny naked figure (i.e. a soul) is shown rising from the body of the deceased. The earliest paintings have the simplicity and directness of approach that we have come to admire in funerary portraits from the Fayoum area of Egypt: a firm pose, a steady gaze. Where there are groups of figures, Michael is ever-present as a supreme intermediary between prayerful suppliants and their all-powerful God. Thus in the apses and

(Fig. 2) TheArchangel Michael, wing of a triptych, Monastery of St Thomas the hermit, Akhmin, Egypt (u/d).

(Fig. 3) TheAscension, wall painting from Bawit, Egypt, seventh century; Coptic Museum, Cairo *(detail).*

niches of countless Coptic chapels and monasteries of the Nile Valley, he was paired with Gabriel as ardent worshipper of Christ, and of the Virgin and Child. (*Fig.* 3) Later this pairing of Michael and Gabriel sometimes appears in the group created by artists in the medieval byzantine period known as the *Deesis* (= prayer). The *Deesis* shows the Virgin and St. John the Baptist in prayer on either side of Christ, who is usually enthroned; the archangels are added one on either side in the same attitude.

We have seen that in the very earliest paintings of Michael he holds the scales of the Last Judgment. Scales are in fact symbolic of what was a very ancient concept: that of weighing as a means of judging a deceased person's fitness to pass safely into the Kingdom of the Hereafter. For example, it is found in the teachings of Zoroastrianism (alluded to earlier with regard to their belief in angels). Zoroaster had taught that man had to strive after perfection in thought, in word, and in deed; and four days after his death, at his individual judgment, his good deeds and evil deeds were weighed in a balance. If good out-weighed evil, he crossed a bridge into Heaven, where he remained until the universal judgment took place at the final universal resurrection.

In Judaism it is Yahweh alone who judges man, and here we also find the notion of weighing. It was in the heart of a man that the true measure of his worthiness lay, and in particular, sincerity of heart is given as a necessary condition of ritual observance:

(Fig. 4) Hunefer Witnesses the Weighing of his Heart, funerary papyrus, c. 1360 BC; Egyptian Museum, Cairo (detail).

> *"A man's conduct may strike him as upright, Yahweh, however, weighs the heart."*
> *(Proverbs 21:2)* [5]

Scales also played a part in ancient Egypt in the judging of a deceased person's fitness to proceed along the path to the Life of the Spirit. The heart was also the seat of man's inner life, and in a literal sense: it was removed upon his death, whereupon Anubis, the jackal-headed god of Death, would lead the deceased into the Judgment Hall. Here his heart was weighed against a feather – a feather being the material embodiment of *Maat*, the goddess whose very essence was

(Fig. 5) The Archangel Michael, icon of the fourteenth century; Byzantine Museum, Athens.

that of Truth and Justice. Evil deeds would add weight to the heart; to indicate a virtuous life an ancient Egyptian heart had to be light – 'as light as a feather'. (*Fig.* 4)

The land of Egypt had for millennia lain at a crossroads of all the religions we have mentioned: the cults of ancient Egypt, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. In fact for several hundred years after Christianity had established itself, many age-old Egyptian beliefs remained dominant. So for Christian artists developing their ideas and skills against such a background, nothing would have been more natural than to portray the new faith in a mode that would be readily understood by the community.[6] Thus it was that, notwithstanding an innate change of attitude towards judgment and God's infinite mercy, Christian artists duly changed the protagonist, and in their terms this simply meant, to quote a visitor to the Graeco-Roman museum in Alexandria, "a sword-wielding Anubis holding the heart of a corpse, sprout[ed] wings and turn[ed] into St. Michael weighing the souls of the dead".[7]

Any enquiry into this widespread devotion to the Archangel Michael during the earliest centuries, must take into account the case of the Emperor Constantine I, the Great. Later legend even ascribes his conversion to Christianity after his victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in Rome in 312 to Michael's intervention. Certainly

(Fig. 7) The Miracle at Chonai, icon, second half of the twelfth century; The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt.

what is probably the most ancient among documented shrines in the Christian world dedicated to Michael, the so-called Michaelion, was built in the fourth century not far from his new capital, Constantinople – the first Christian city – possibly by the emperor himself. During the following century many other churches rose in Michael's honour – one of which, before 500 A.D., was built within the imperial palace.

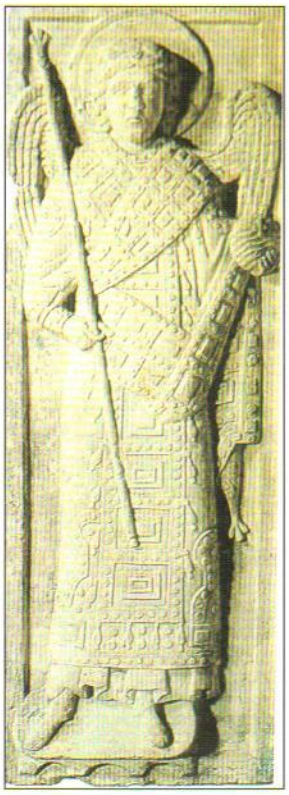
The establishment of Constantinople as a centre of power and influence marked the beginning of a thousand years of sponsored artistic activity. Decoration, from the most grandiose scheme to the smallest portable object of daily use, was of a new imaginative beauty, delicate, polished and refined. (*Fig.* 5) And where art was religious, it was at the same time imperial in scope.

The Archangel Michael and other archangels were now often given court dress. For example, when shown in scenes of heaven, accompanying Christ or the Virgin, they resembled high court officials. There are even instances where archangels and emperor are wearing almost identical costumes; that is to say the *loros* (a long stole worn by emperors and empresses on festive occasions), and red buskins decorated with pearls; each holds an orb in the left hand, while the right hand supports the *labarum* (imperial standard). (*Fig.* 6) Imperial dress in the hierarchy of heaven was certainly an anomaly: the texts speak of archangels as commanders of the heavenly hosts, subject to and ministering to God, and of Christ alone as the *basileus* (ruler). Scholars have recently suggested that there was a political factor involved here, an on-going exploitation through works of art of a parallel between emperor and archangels; that similarity implied, for the emperor, Divine acceptance (even at death after an earthly life of crime, as in the case of Basil I). Certainly by the thirteenth century some emperors had even acquired wings.[8]

At the same time, 'imperial' archangels were very rarely portrayed in an earthly context,[9] for example when appearing in Lives of the Saints they did not in the main wear imperial dress, but either that of *cubicularii* (imperial servants), or else an antique tunic and *himation* (long outer garment); or again, if appropriate, armour.

A beautiful example of this 'earthly' version is the subject of a small twelfth-century icon painted in Constantinople, *The Miracle at Chonae* (a shrine near ancient Colossae in Phrygia, already mentioned in connection with Michael's popular association with wells and water generally). (*Fig.* 7) Jealous pagans had released floodwaters that threatened to engulf the shrine, and the hermit Archippos stands at his church door pleading for help. Michael, with long red lance, cleaves a hole in the nearby rock, which swallows up the floodwater and saves the shrine.

In parallel with these developments, artists trained in old-established Hellenistic centres of artistic activity in the eastern Mediterranean, such as Alexandria, continued to work in Hellenistic style. The archangel so finely carved on an ivory diptych from sixth-century Constantinople, is accordingly given the appearance of a Greek statue with typically round face, curled hair, and clinging 'wind-blown' drapery, he stands beneath an intricately-worked classical arch; and, inspired, it seems, by classical winged victory figures, he holds a staff – the imperial



(Fig. 6) The Archangel Michael, marble relief from the Monastery of the Virgin Peribleptos, Constantinople, late twelfth century; Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst, Berlin.

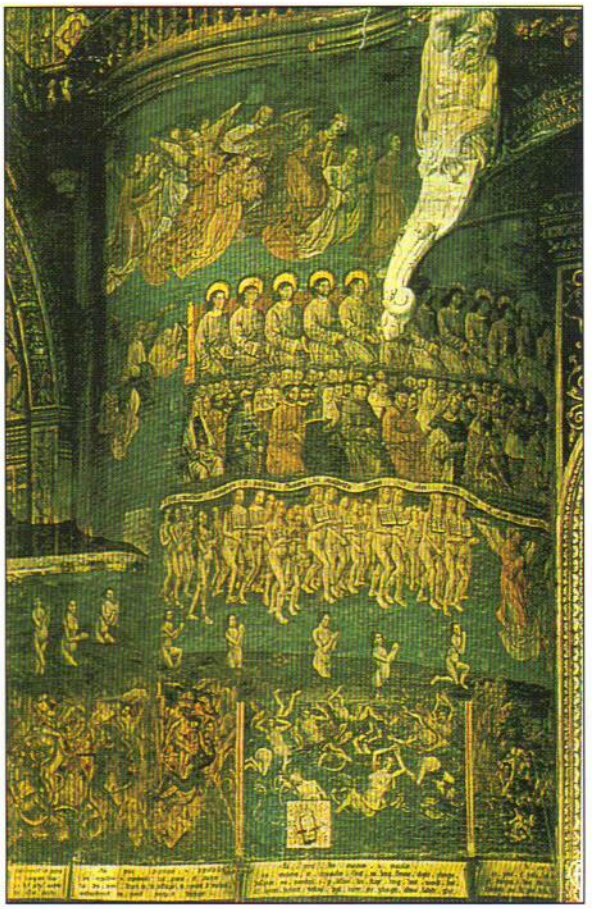
(Fig. 8) The Archangel Michael, ivory leaf of a diptych, mid-sixth century; British Museum, London.

(Fig. 9) The Last Judgment, mosaic of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Torcello Cathedral, Italy *(detail).*

labarum, and the *globus cruciger* – symbol of imperial power, surmounted by a cross. (*Fig.* 8)

In contrast to the calm and gentle strength of this image, spectacular composite scenes of the Last Judgment devised by Byzantine artists, show Michael as a dynamic defender of souls. (*Fig.* 9) The iconology of the Last Judgment had in fact developed after centuries of controversy. Controversy had been rife not only on the general subject of religious images (the period of their complete banning – Iconoclasm – being relatively short, from 730 to 843 A.D.), but ecclesiastical authorities from the early years of Christianity railed constantly against what was considered an exaggerated dependence in popular culture upon the notion of angels. Their fear lay in the possibility of idolatry.[10] Debates centered on the representation in art of these spiritual, transcendent creations of God, who occupy a mid-area somewhere between God and humanity, and whose nature is not fully determinable. An important figure in defense of symbolic images was the neo-Platonic writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, first mentioned in 533 A.D. His treatise, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, was extremely influential in the sixth century and onwards, in both East and West, in that it clarified the role of art in Christian worship, as a bridge between earthly reality and spiritual truths. He took scriptural passages and some other ancient texts, [11] and set out a structured allegorical framework, convinced that a Christian could truly come to know God and all his creations through visual, as well as verbal, symbolism.[12]

It was to these clear-cut lines of thought that artists responded, by creating the complex composition known as the Last Judgment. Over the centuries, and in general, they kept to the basic scheme, sometimes changing the position of groups of figures, and giving some rein to the imagination – particularly, it may be said, in their scenes of hell. Such was its popularity that the Last Judgment was chosen for prestigious church schemes both in the East and in the West, often being placed on the west or entrance wall, or in the narthex (vestibule), or filling a dome. (*Fig.* 10) Confining our attention to the Archangel Michael, his graceful figure, now in active, warrior mode, is not difficult to recognise amongst the general activity. The activity is ordered, it follows set rules; and usually the pair of scales, if not held by Michael, are not far away. However, there are interest-



(Fig. 10) The Last judgment, wall painting in the Cathedral of St Cecilia, French School, fifteenth century; Albi (Tarn), France *(detail)*

(Fig. 11) The Last Judgment (God weighs the souls), icon from the Church in Krajná Bystra, mid-sixteenth century; Museum of Ukrainian Culture, Swidnik *(detail).*

ing icons in eastern Europe where it is God himself who holds the scales: a mid-sixteenth century icon from a church in Krajná Bystra, now in the Museum of Ukrainian Culture, Svidník (*Fig.* 11); another of the late sixteenth century in the wooden church of Lukov – Venecia; and one of the late seventeenth century from a wooden church in Nová Sedlica, now in the Slovák National Gallery, Bratislava. All these icons show the hand of God, holding the scales, coming from beneath the *Heitomasia*, which is the throne, or sometimes altar, prepared for the Second Coming. The *Heitomasia* is a feature of the Last Judgment in eastern versions, not normally included in the west.

It must be said that away from the activity of a Last Judgment scene, artists often portrayed Michael in a static pose, even when, scales in one hand, he is simultaneously dealing with devils. And often the devils endeavour to falsify the weighing procedure.

Having briefly investigated the age-old legends and traditions behind the material objects shown in the Mdina version, a few words on basic attitudes to religious images may be helpful. Over the centuries deep differences developed between East and West in the way religious truths were presented by artists. We have already mentioned the influence of the sixth century writings of Pseudo-Dionysus. Almost in parallel came the dictum of Rome from Gregory the Great (c.540-604): the role of images was an educative role, to illustrate the illiterate. In the wake of another Ecumenical Council (in 787), a dictum of Charlemagne's time declared that an image that reflected physical traits of a person or event must never become a cult image. (This was not a new statement, but a restatement of previous arguments.) From the idea that all images had an educational function, certain habits arose which a short essay can only indicate in the briefest terms: the inclusion of non-Christian symbols, words of explanation, warnings (sometime gruesome), reference to current scientific treatises, astrology – these all made for an unprecedented combination of secular and sacred material. Religious art also often became highly dec-

orative and highly coloured. We only have to note the attractive use of bright colour in the case of the Mdina panels: the by now traditional figure of the Archangel Michael is given a clear-cut, balanced profile, that is set against alternating areas of deep red and deep blue, in a rhythmic way often used to link adjoining scenes or groups of figures.

Analysing this small figure may have revealed much of its history, but perhaps, to paraphrase one critic of the Western attitude, "when images serve knowledge, they have no irrational, Divine 'presence'." For others, however, the sheer brilliance and originality of the greatest Western artists was to be of equal appeal and inspiration.

NOTES

1. Probably the panels once formed part of an altarpiece for the Mdina Cathedral: see illustration in M. Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands* 1400-1900, Malta, 1987, p. 21. Whether other panels were included in the original work is not known. For the panel for the Death of the Virgin, see my essay in *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. VII, No. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 13-17.
2. Zoroaster is considered to be the first prophet to teach belief in free will, judgment after death, heaven, hell, and the ultimate defeat of evil (Satan) by the Wise Lord. The early chronology of Zoroastrianism remains obscure and controversial.
3. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all recognise the three archangels named in the Hebrew Bible: Michael (see Daniel 10:13; 12:1, of c. 164 B.C.); Gabriel (also in Daniel 8:11, 9:21-23), and Raphael (in the book of Tobit, 400-500 B.C.). Other Judaic writings also cite Uriel. Christians, besides telling of the Archangel Michael's victory in Revelation 12:7, cite three others of lesser popularity in the Book of Enoch: Ramiel (Angel of Hope), Raguel ("Friend of God"), and Sariel ("Will of God"). For Islam, it is Gabriel who announces Muhammad's prophethood, then dictates to him the words of God, the Koran.
4. For example, the Book of Jubilees of the second century B.C., one of a whole class of so-called *Pseudepigrapha* (– having false attributions) a tradition of re-telling biblical narratives, found in Jewish and in Christian writing from this time onwards.
5. Bible references are to *The Jerusalem Bible*, London, 1966.
6. Recent scholarship has in fact not been slow to point to other features in Coptic paintings that are adaptations of ancient Egyptian iconology. Holy figures were given a 'halo', for example, just as a gilded sun-disc was displayed behind the head of the jackal-headed god Anubis; and like the Egyptian god Horus, warrior saints were shown in armour spearing a crocodile or snake - symbol of evil.
7. See William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain*, London, 1998, p. 386.
8. On coins of Michael VIII Palaeologus and Andronikos II: see H. Maguire, "Style and Iconology in Byzantine Imperial Art", in *Gesta*, 28 (1989), pp. 217-31.
9. We do find exceptions during the later byzantine period, in the furthest regions of the byzantine empire: in some fourteenth century paintings in the former Yugoslavia, for instance.
10. It will be remembered that in the first century A.D. St. Paul, in his *Letter to the Church at Colossae*, warned against "grovelling to angels and worshipping them.." (Colossians 2:18).
11. Past scholars have pointed to the serons of St. Ephraem of Syria (d. 373?) as source of many details in representations of the Last Judgment. See Selma Jónsdóttir, *An Eleventh Century Byzantine Last Judgment in Iceland*, Raykjavík, 1959, p. 15 ff., who quotes G. Voss, *Das jüngste Gericht in der bildenen Kunst des frühen Mittelalters*, Leipzig, 1884, pp. 64-75; and E. Berteaux, *L'art dans l'Italie Méridionale*, Paris, 1904, pp. 260-267.
12. He established the famous angelic order: from the Father, the Divine Being, flow the Nine Choirs of Angels: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, Angels. By these stages the Divine is transmitted to humans, and humans are enabled to ascend to the Divine. This philosophy became the basis of icon painting from the sixth century for around 1000 years. For a recent in-depth study of this vast subject, see G. Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium*, University of California, 2001.