The Anastasis: an Easter icon at the Wignacourt Museum, Rabat, Malta.

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Easter 2009

Figure 1: *The Anastasis. Tempera on panel, 41 cm x 28 cm. Wignacourt Museum, Rabat, Malta.*

"The feast of Easter", says St. Gregory the Theologian in an Easter sermon, "is for us the feast of feasts and the celebration of celebrations, it excels all other festivals, as the sun excels the stars..". This annual celebration of the Resurrection of Christ is expressed visually by orthodox Christians by means of the icon known as the 'Anastasis'-—the Greek word for resurrection—the title in this example being inscribed in red lettering above the central figure of Christ that dominates the scene. Christ is also identified, the letters IC XC being the first and last letters of the two Greek words for the name Jesus Christ; a bar above the letters indicating a sacred name. It is an icon that can bring new insights to those of us more conversant with the visual repertoire of western Christianity.

As a prefix to its interpretation, a few words concerning western traditions are in order, in that western artists depicted Christ's resurrection rather differently. They show him literally rising triumphant from an empty tomb, a scene that might be followed by a version of the anastasis composition renamed as the Descent of Christ. Furthermore, the newly acquired title becomes qualified in the west according to Christ's destination: this may be given as 'Hell' (and hence the familiar 'Harrowing of Hell'), 'Hades', or 'Limbo'—often regardless of the details of the composition, which may or may not include the figure of Hades and dramatic struggles with Satan. Whether arbitrary or not, these different destinations pose theological questions that will not be dealt with in this analysis, which will concentrate upon the uncovering and evaluating of the message transmitted visually by a classical Easter icon. It would also be true to say that no viewer with a Christian background.would have much trouble understanding its message in general terms of Christ's saving of threatened humanity. Resplendent, calm, and surrounded by an eager crowd of onlookers—some crowned, one a saint—he draws towards himself a man and a woman from the edge of a dark pit. It is when details of the composition are analysed that the full impact of the message can be understood: it is one in which the historical (as narrated in the Gospels) is united with the cosmic, so as to be seen by the contemplative viewer as one seamless whole.

THE MESSAGE CONVEYED

Figure 2: *The Anastasis (detail).*

The subject is introduced by an angel seen hovering at the icon's upper edge in a narrow opening between two rugged mountain peaks. These peaks curve inwards towards each other as if, but for the angel's presence, they would enclose the central scene. The angel carries aloft three symbols known as the Instruments of Passion: the spear with which a soldier had pierced Christ's side, the Cross of his crucifixion, and the reed holding a sponge filled with the vinegar that was given Him to drink. These indicate that the crucifixion has taken place: it is that moment when "the earth shook and rocks were split" (Matthew 27:51), an event of pain and cruelty that appears to be echoed in the terrifying landscape that encroaches on either side The angel bends over the central figure of Christ: a figure shown not as a human body after suffering

the torments of the cross, but erect, transfigured, clothed in bright garments. His halo is inscribed with the Greek letters "O W N" ("The One Who Is"): the name of God that was given by God himself to Moses (Exodus 3:14).

Christ is enclosed within a mandorla, which sweeps down through the rocky ground to pierce the utter darkness of a cave-—the underworld. His feet are planted upon its broken gates, and as he stands astride the opening, eager hands from the crowd on either side reach through the mandorla towards him.

Much of the meaning of the Anastasis icon is revealed by the various crossings of the boundary of this mandorla, which was an ancient symbol now used by Christians to indicate the line of separation of the earth from the unknown regions beyond. Marking this division were the heavens, usually shown, as here, by concentric bands in shades of blue that darken towards the boundary. The boundary is crossed in opposite directions: inwards by those reaching towards Christ; and outwards by Christ himself, who grasps with either hand the leading figure of the group on each side. In addition, from his person bright rays shine out in all directions to pierce the heavens. They are a reminder that though the living Christ within the mandorla is now outside earthly time and space and beyond full human understanding, intimations of His divinity, majesty and mystery are continually being sent out to reach humankind.

What we see in this Easter icon is plainly the effect of a miraculous event, rather than the event itself. Christ's resurrection was not witnessed by humans, and is not described in the Gospels; and Orthodox theologians deemed that, as a simple act of God, it could not possibly be expressed visually: only the effect of God's action upon humankind could be represented. The effect is conveyed by visual metaphor—the 'making of the invisible visible'. Visual metaphor indeed is an essential part of devotion to Christ for the orthodox Christian, for whom the visual combines with theology, prayer, and the liturgy to create one seamless whole. In this way, the illustration of a biblical figure may incorporate details that for the orthodox bring to mind the words of a well-known theologian or preacher of recent date.

Turning now from Christ to the groups on either side: from certain figures we learn that Christ is visiting those who have died before his crucifixion. Collectively they are known as 'the righteous', or 'the just': those who on earth have striven to know God, and who may have lived saintly lives. They are not suffering, but through the centuries, due to man's heritage of original sin, they have been imprisoned in the underworld, not free to live a full life with God. Amongst those on Christ's right side the most prominent is St. John the Baptist, who wears the antique mantle of a prophet. The first two letters of the Greek form of his name are just visible, inscribed in red beside his halo—the latter indicating his death as a martyr. He is known as St. John the Forerunner (*podromos*), and the declamatory aspect of his mission is emphasized visually by a broad sweep of one arm so far across the boundary of the mandorla that his hand reaches close to the head of Christ; whilst his other hand is veiled in expression of his devotion. At the same time, St. John's head turns away from the mandorla to face the animated group assembled behind him: his stance thus combines the depth of his own faith in Christ with his call to preach Christ's word to others as described in the gospels.

On Christ's left, the crowned figures in imperial dress are righteous rulers of the Old Testament. Foremost is King David, celebrated as the greatest King of Israel: a many-sided monarch, venerated as author of the Psalms, for his music, and notably for his humility and penitence for the sins he committed. Through the heroism of his victory over Goliath he was considered to be a prefiguration of Christ's victory over Satan. Standing next to him and shown, as usually, young and beardless, is his son and successor, King Solomon, considered to be the embodiment of all wisdom and righteousness, author by ancient tradition of the Old Testament Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, and the builder of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem for the Ark of the Covenant. Father and son both extend open hands towards Christ in the conventional gesture of acceptance. The right hand of King David, as the prefiguration of Christ, has reached across the border of Christ's mandorla, and at the same time he turns his head in order to look directly at his attentive son, thus expressing the solidarity of an enlightened ruling dynasty.

At the head of these two groups of the righteous are the figures of Adam to our left and Eve to our right, representing the rest of mankind going further back in time to the early days of Creation. The particular

form they are given here may be unfamiliar to Western eyes, more used to a young and graceful man and woman walking together in the Garden of Eden. Here humanity is shown as it had become following their disobedience, recriminations, and final expulsion by God from the Garden. Adam has reached old age, after years of toil, his gesture illustrating words from the Psalms of David: "Hear the voice of my supplication ... as I lift up my hands towards thy most holy sanctuary.", and "I will extol thee, O Lord, for thou has drawn me up, and has not let my foes rejoice over me." (Psalm 28/27).

Eve, the 'mother of mankind', is almost completely enveloped in her maphorion, the traditional garment worn by holy women, and as usual for Eve, shown in red. It is by means of this garment in fact that the veiling of her hands-—well-attested as expressive of awe and respect—has been extended visually to cover the whole of her person, revealing only her face, downcast, and the hand that Christ himself has uncovered. Its outline emphasises her gesture of deep reverence, known by the Greek word *proskynesis* (in Latin, *adoratio*), and which in Eve's case here is the full prostration, indicating an intensity of prayer and entreaty—the gesture used to illustrate the words of the repentant David when rebuked by the Prophet Nathan: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13).

Christ's gesture as he takes hold of repentant mankind, Adam with one hand and Eve with the other, is depicted in a specific manner, with an interesting history. He does not simply take an outstretched hand in his, but in each case his fingers grasp firmly around the wrist. In ancient Greece and Rome this gesture symbolised legal possession: a bride, for instance, was 'in the hand' of her parent (father or mother), who on the wedding day would accordingly grasp the daughter's wrist and place her hand into that of her husband.. Again, in well-mannered society it conveyed a sense of leading, guiding and protection, as when a host would politely guide his guest to the appointed place in his house or at table. It became part of Christian iconography, and in the context of the anastasis—the moment of mankind's redemption through the sacrifice of His Son—it signals quite simply the return to God of God's own.

At this point the individual images surrounding Christ combine to give the full meaning of the anastasis message: that from the moment of Christ's sacrifice all humanity has been freed from sin, all are born anew, and all are now brought by Christ to live in God's timeless world. It might be said that the composition as a whole invites comparison with a text from the New Testament: the parable of the prodigal son, one of the parables told by Christ himself during his life on earth, and based for his audience on earthly, contemporary life (Luke 15:11-32). In the icon a newly resplendent Christ within a mandorla becomes himself the forgiving welcoming 'father' of the parable, whose 'home' is now visualised in eternal, cosmic terms.

The event of the Anastasis is commemorated on Great Saturday (Easter Saturday), and its associated icon is called the 'Easter' icon as a prefiguration of the coming celebration. It is integral to the sequence of icons that illustrates the cycle of Great Feasts throughout the year, and that embellishes the church's iconostasis, the screen marking the boundary between the human world and the spiritual world of the sanctuary. By the presence of the icons, the two worlds are reconciled and united. It seems that the Easter icon, in particular, demonstrates this union: it shows events that have taken place in the earthly world of time and space, that through Christ's sacrifice have been transposed and are part of God's spiritual and timeless reality.

FURTHER STUDY

The fact that the Wignacourt icon is inscribed in Greek does not indicate that it was painted in Greece, or in a Greek-speaking province, Greek being the ecclesiastical language, in much the same way as Latin in the West Provenance will not be easy to research. Over the centuries, at different times in different regions of the orthodox world, the basic composition has undergone numerous changes in style: the figure of Christ, for example, has varied in degree from the graceful and flamboyant, to a firmer, even stern stance. Again, the position of Eve varies: during earlier centuries she is normally shown awaiting her turn immediately behind Adam. It seems that our balanced composition, where Christ takes one in either hand, became more common during the fourteenth century. It was chosen early that century, albeit in a contrasting style, for

the fresco of the anastasis decorating the apse of the parekklesion in the former Chora Monastery, now the Karije Camii mosque, in Istanbul, —and chosen, as often, for a funerary chapel. Notable also over time are variations in the Old Testament figures chosen for inclusion amongst the righteous: their comings and goings have been analysed by A D. Kartsonis in her useful publication *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton, 1986).

Whilst the Anastasis icon itself is a treasure that merits further study, the interpretation of its Easter message reveals to us, perhaps with a new clarity, some of the deep meaning given by orthodox Christians to the "feast of feasts".