The Dormition of the Virgin at the Cathedral Museum Mdina

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THE DORMITION OF THE VIRGIN AT THE CATHEDRAL MUSEUM, MDINA

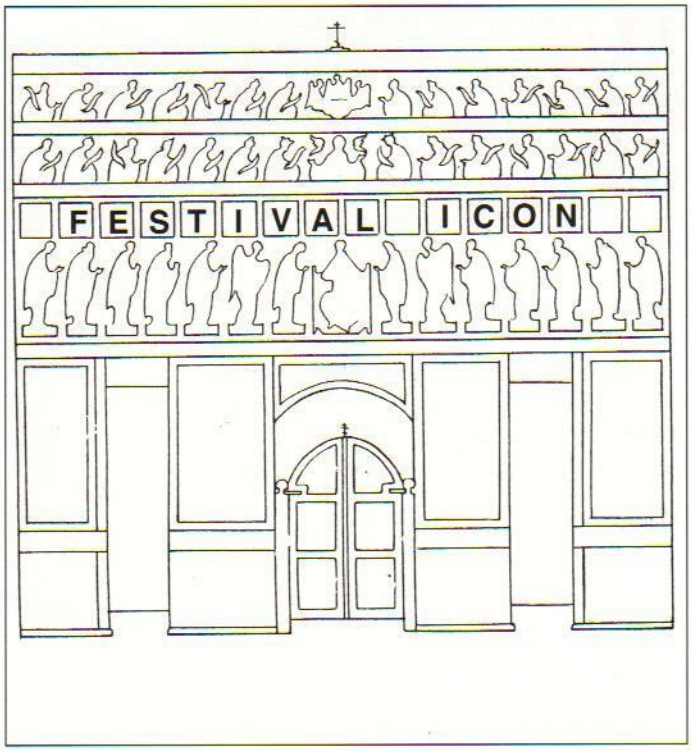
The Festival of the Assumption

JOANNA LACE researches the story of an ancient panel at the Mdina Cathedral Museum

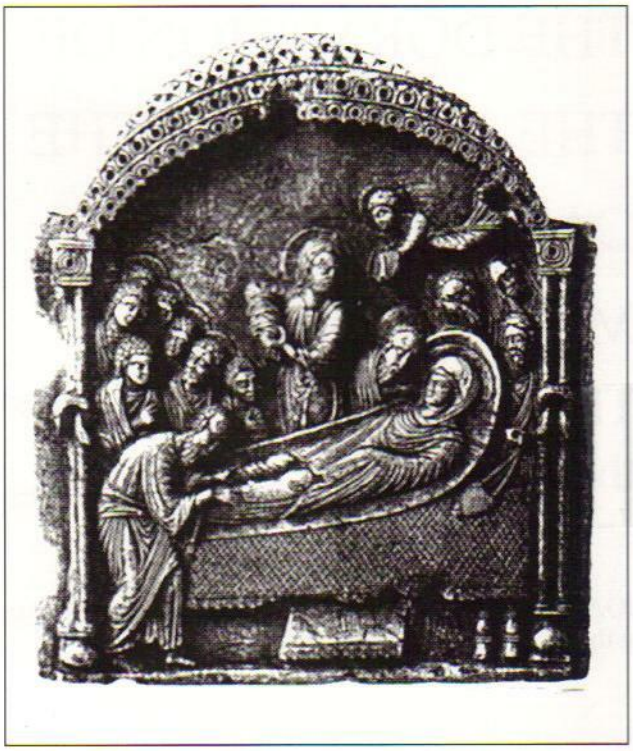
We are all familiar in western Europe with depictions of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary: Mary floats upwards towards Heaven, assisted by angels. What is less well-known is the ancient eastern iconography from which this familiar image originated. A small panel in the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, presents a useful example of the eastern tradition *(Fig. 1)*. The contrast with our often beautiful images of the sacred event could hardly be greater. Here the Virgin lies inert, eyes closed, surrounded by the twelve apostles. One of theseholds a palm branch. The figure of Christ (recognised by his cross-inscribed halo) stands upright behind them, an angel on either side, holding a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. What can this mean? And below the bed, why an angel with sword raised, and blood pouring from the severed hand of an armed man?

First of all, to explain the title given to this painting, and its place in Christian worship. The event known in the west as the Assumption, is known in the eastern church as the Dormition, from the Latin *dormitio,* or in Greek *koúmesis,* meaning 'falling asleep'. It is one of the principal liturgical feasts of the Christian year, depicted in eastern/orthodox churches on the *iconostasis*, the high wall of icons that

(Fig. 1) The Dormition of the Virgin, Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Malta.



(Fig. 2) Diagram of a church iconostasis



(Fig. 3) Miniature relief sculpture in steatite, Constantinople, second half of the tenth century; *Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.*

evolved from the ancient sanctuary screen, as one of a series of festival icons, each celebrating a different New Testament event. The series is arranged in a row immediately beneath that of the prophets of the Old Testament, and above that of the *'Tchin'*, or order of individual saints, martyrs, and apostles, who incline gently as intercessors towards the central figure of Christ. *(See Fig. 2).* As a separate image the Dormition can sometimes be seen up on the western wall of the interior of a church, facing inwards over the exit, as a sign of promise to those returning to the outside world. In fresco cycles the Dormition completes the cycle of the Life of the Virgin; and in icons and altarpieces devoted to the Virgin, it will appear where smaller subsidiary panels of her life surround a main image. It must be said at this point that we do not know the original siting of the Mdina work, only that it probably formed part of an altarpiece of the (?) fourteenth/fifteenth century that was dismantled at some stage[1].

Turning again to the scene where the Virgin lies 'sleeping', surrounded by the apostles, we realise that we are witnessing the actual moment of her demise, because a newborn baby represents the soul of a person: the Virgin's soul has left her body, and is being carried by Christ. His dominant figure is surrounded by a mandorla – the almond-shaped orbit (very often blue, as here) that signifies the dazzling radiance of His Divinity. The upward sweep of the accompanying angels implies His imminent ascent to Heaven bearing the soul of the Virgin. This scene is, in essence, the basic iconology of the Dormition. A beautiful steatite relief of the tenth century is an example in miniature of the same simple design. *(Fig. 3)*

However, religious narrative art is not created in a vac uum; it springs from the written word. The full meanin underlying the image is best understood in the context of th Council of Ephesus of 431 A.D., the result of centuries o doctrinal discussion, with rival factions in lengthy ecclesi astical debate concerning the persons of the Trinity, th nature of Christ, the role of the Virgin. At Ephesus the Vir gin Mary was defined as Mother of God, the *Theotokos,* o God-Bearer. As *Theotokos* she was deemed, at the end o her earthly life, to have been assumed bodily into Heave by Christ and the Heavenly Host. Though the eastern churc has not made it a dogma – the western church did so only i 1950 – belief in the Assumption of the Virgin is affirme unambiguously in the hymns sung at her Festival, whic was being widely observed by the sixth century. At aroun the year 600 the date was fixed at the 15th August; an annua rejoicing that She who bore the Son, share in His resurrec tion and assumption – the first human to be raised into th glory of heaven, to live forever in the life of the Age t Come. For Christ's followers then, the Virgin is seen as th supreme source of their continuing faith in His message o salvation, and the depiction of the Life of the Virgin accord ingly took on a significance second only to that of Chris himself. Here lay the impetus for artists in all media to pla their role in celebrating the newly-proclaimed truths.

In art, as in the faith of the Church, two distinct but insep arable aspects of the Virgin's death were expressed: (i) her earthly death and burial; and (ii) her resurrection and ascen sion to Heaven. Just how artists came to formulate these tw aspects with such clarity can be explained with reference t

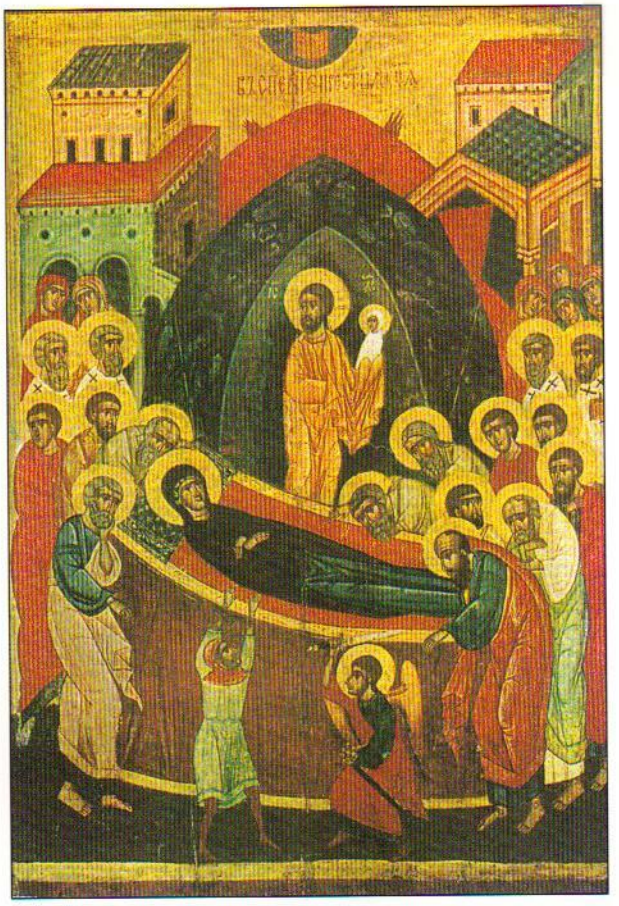
(Fig. 4) Creton icon, second half of the fifteenth century or first half of the sixteenth; *Museo delle Icone Bizantine e post Bizantine, Venice.*

the written texts. [2] Research has shown that the nucleus of the famous story of the Death and Assumption of the Virgin had circulated throughout the Christian communities since the third century or even earlier. In fact the doctrinal debates referred to above became of intense popular concern. [3] The earliest of the great mass of written texts that survive to this day – Greek, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopian – probably date from the fourth century, the standard literary source for the Dormition being the Apocryphal Discourse of St. John the Divine. It was in the seventh century that John, Archbishop of Thessalonica, recounted and expanded this Discourse in the form of a sermon, and this became the most widely accepted version in Greek. The leading Latin version is the tenth century Narrative of Pseudo-Melito, Bishop of Sardis. Then in the thirteenth century a compilation of ancient texts known as the Golden Legend *(Legenda Aurea)* was made by a Dominican, Jacobus de Voragine (1230-98), for some years Bishop of Genoa. The section of the Golden Legend referring to the Assumption includes two sermons, one attributed to St. Cosmas, followed by another attributed to St. John of Damascus.

These three principal texts, Greek, Latin, and the Golden Legend, all recount a brutal attempt at the violation of the sanctity of the Virgin, though not all refer to a palm branch. They all differ from one another in various details, which need to be analysed briefly in order to discover the exact source of the horrific incident in the Mdina painting.

The obvious starting point is the Golden Legend: from its inception it became a popular and influential sourcebook

(Fig. 5) Illumination from the Gospel of Queen Mariun, by Sargis Pidzak 1346; *Treasury of the Armenian Cathedral of St. James, Jerusalem.*



(Fig. 6) Ruthenian icon (now Ukraine), end of the sixteenth century; *National Gallery, Prague.*

for Christian iconography in the west, and the Mdina panels are purported to be Spanish. [4] There are two differing episodes concerning violence by the Virgin's bier. St Cosmas tells how, whilst the apostles were carrying the Virgin into Jerusalem with great ceremony, the high priest sent against them a great number of armed men, one of whom rushed at the bier, intending to throw the Virgin's body to the ground. Instantly his hands were torn from his arms and remained hanging from the bier. St. Peter (and in the Mdina painting he is indeed shown speaking, immediately to the right of the armed man) told the blasphemer he would only be pardoned if he embraced the Virgin's body and acknowledged her Son as the Son of God. (The text continues, saying that the man obeyed Peter, whereupon his hands became reattached to his arms). The version attributed to St. John, further on in the Golden Legend text, refers more simply to a group of trouble-making Jews, one of whom seized the bier with both hands, and actually overturned it, whereupon *one* of his hands withered and fell off; then with tears and cries of repentance, the man placed his hand upon the holy body of the Virgin, and was instantly cured. Again, there is no mention here of a palm branch, whereas it does play a part in St. Cosmas' account: in his opening passage he relates how the Angel of the Annunciation, on telling the Virgin she would soon join her Son in paradise, brought her a palm branch as a token of her coming victory over the corruption of death. Then later, by her bier, St. Peter took a date from the palm, gave it to the man he had cured, and told him, "Go back to the city, and place this date upon those who are sick, and all those who believe will retain their health". The Mdina painting thus shows a close correspondence to St. Cosmas' sermon.

However, if, to check with an earlier source, we turn back 300 years to the Latin Narration of Pseudo-Melito, some details are different again. We find that it was one of the onlookers, a "prince of the priests', who, filled with fury, approached the bier in order to overturn it and cast the Virgin's body to the ground; his hands dried up and remained fastened to the bier. Here also the part played by St. Peter is given greater prominence: his administration of the cure is accompanied by a lengthy doxology, and is two-fold: belief in Jesus Christ releases the priest's hands, but they remain withered and painful until the man has obediently kissed the Virgin's bier, has repeated his belief, and added "... and in all things whatsoever Peter the apostle of God hath told me". Again, the palm plays a part, but it is more complex. The Virgin received it from the angel, and told John to carry it before her bier on the way to the tomb. Then later we read of the following altercation: the apostles asked "Who shall carry the palm?", and John said to Peter: "You! You are the first of the apostles!", whereupon Peter replied: "No. You, John, out of

(Fig. 7) Titian, *The Assunta*, 1518; *Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frasi, Venice*

all of us are a virgin ... You should carry it." The Latin narrative continues: Peter said to the "prince of priests: whom he had cured: "Take the palm from John, and go to the city, to the many who have been blinded [on account of their disbelief]. If they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, lay the palm upon their eyes, and they will be healed; and those who do not believe will remain afflicted." The priest did this. Those who refused to believe, died. He reported all this to the apostles, and gave them back the palm.

When we consult the Greek Narrative of John of Thessalonica, of the seventh century, there is no mention of the palm. Several other unedited Greek manuscripts, however, do include angel and palm branch in an opening section, with the palm branch invariably used later to heal blinded Jews.

What is of greater significance in relation to the Mdina painting comes in John of Thessalonica's version of the violation episode. The later texts, we realise, gave no mention of the angel with the drawn sword. Here in the Greek Narrative we find: "a certain Hebrew named Jephonias ... ran forth and set upon the bed ... and lo, an angel of the Lord ... smote his two hands from off his shoulders ... and left them hanging in the air about the bed". A brief passage follows telling of the man's repentance, and his cure by Peter.

The discovery of a Greek source may prove of vital importance to future research. How the Mdina artist came to follow the Greek text for his painting, whether this followed naturally from his cultural background, or was his patron's choice, or again if the panels were a chance acquisition due to a thriving international art market, is not known. Certainly the Greek version with Jephonias and the angel was to be seen, though not uniformly, throughout eastern Europe (for example in frescoes in the former Yugoslavia, and in Greece *(Fig. 4)*, in the Middle East (for example in Cappadocia and in Armenia *(Fig. 5)*; and in Russia *(Fig. 6)*. The basic iconography often became overlaid, not to say overcrowded, with subsidiary features garnered from Narratives that are themselves both lengthy and colourful. The most successful of these 'cosmic' compositions were a veritable *tour de force* of colour, harmony and balance. Though the simple Mdina version in no way belongs to this sophisticated *genre*, it still retains the basic form, the ancient Greek symbolism.

This essay began by contrasting the Mdina Dormition with a typical western Assumption: the Virgin shown as floating upwards towards Heaven. This is not to imply that the classic image of the Dormition – the Virgin lying on her death-bed – did not continue to be used by western artists throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. But with the repetition of the formula came the wish by major innovative artists to exploit new ideas of realism, and we find certain tendencies that have continued to our own times: the passing over of details handed down from the ancient texts, in favour of an emphasis upon the drama of the final miracle, the *dénouement*. We only have to recall the dynamic images of great Renaissance artists: Titian's *Assunta*, for example, in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, in Venice, is a splendid example of the trend. *(Fig. 7)*

In conclusion, what the Mdina painting exemplifies is the continuation of a conventional image. We have shown how, by compression, the richness of the ancient Dormition texts was preserved, and that the drama as revealed is that which took place specifically at the Virgin's death-bed, her death-bed scene in fact – so detailed in the texts, and so carefully followed by eastern artists. Furthermore, the inclusion of the angel with the sword has revealed an interesting Greek component – one that is present in many eastern versions, but not usually seen in the west.

Notes

1. As presently mounted, the Dormition is slightly larger than the other two panels, the Resurrection, and St. Michael the Archangel. They have all been cut down: the Dormition on all sides. The Resurrection and the St. Michael may originally have been the same size.
2. The secondary sources I have used throughout, unless otherwise indicated, are: M.R. James. *The Apocryphal New Testament,* Oxford 1953: and J.B.M. Roze (trans.) *Jacques de Voragine: La Legende Dorée,* Paris 1967.
3. St. Gregory of Nyssa, at Constantinople in the early 380's, complained that he could not get a straight answer to a practical question: "If you ask someone to give you change, he philosophises about the Begotten and the Unbegotten. if you say to the attendant "Is my bath ready?", he tells you that the Son was made out of nothing." Quoted from ed. J.McManners, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, Oxford 1995, "The Articulation of Doctrine", p. 137.
4. See M. Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands 1400-1900,* 1987, p. 15.