

The life of John the Baptist in eighteenth-century icons

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Introduction

In this bachelor thesis a series of eighteenth-century Coptic icons will be discussed and examined to determine which story is depicted and how the painter was familiar with the story. At first the series of seven icons simply seems to narrate the biblical story of John the Baptist, however, in the last icon a fairly apocryphal Coptic tradition is depicted. The focus of this research will be to determine which tradition is actually depicted in the last icon and how the painter knew this story. Although it will be discussed later on in a more broad way, it is necessary to give a short outline to explain the concerns of this thesis.

The icons are located in the Hanging Church or al-Mu'allaqah in Old Cairo (Coptic Cairo) in Egypt. Although most icons in this church are not signed or dated, this series of icons actually is. In the right corner of the panel on the right part of the iconostasis, the series is dated in the Coptic year 1493, which corresponds to the year 1777. In the fourth icon in the lower left corner the same date is shown. In the same place the signature of Yuhanna al-Armani can be found. This is where it becomes interesting. As will appear in the first chapter, the story that is narrated in the last icon is a very specific and old Coptic tradition, but the painter, although living in Cairo, however, is of Armenian origin. Apart from the question to the origin of the tradition itself, a probably even more interesting question is how this story arrived to the eighteenth century and particularly how it was known to the Armenian painter who depicted it in a Coptic church. This thesis will provide an insight in how historical conditions could have provided a ground for renewal in art and in particular, how an ancient story seemed to be rediscovered and depicted in a church in the eighteenth century.

An important part of this research was the fieldwork that had to be done to obtain pictures of the icons and the inscriptions in and around the icons, since these were not available yet. The tour guides of the Hanging Church organized a ladder and some people to write down the inscriptions (which were according to them of poor grammatical quality) and to help with taking the photographs. Due to the no-flash-policy this proved to be quite a challenge, since the light conditions in the church were very poor. Apart from the guides of the church, also Mat Immerzeel and Jacques van der Vliet have been of great help, providing me with comments and suggestions to continue searching for sources and interpreting the materials that I had found so far. Furthermore, Abdelghani al-Kairi has provided me with some very important translations of some of the Arabic inscriptions, particularly the inscription of the last icon. Through these translations it was possible to draw some final conclusions, which before had only been suggestions, since some of these suggestions were now confirmed by the translations, although more translations appeared to be possible.



1. The fieldwork in progress in the Hanging Church in Cairo, with an impression of the location of the icons in the Hanging Church.

The major outline of this thesis is as follows. In the first chapter a description will be given of the seven icons. Besides that, the story that is narrated in the last icon will be explained. From the first chapter there will be a number of questions raised which will be answered as much as possible in chapters two and three. In chapter two attention will be drawn to the historical background of Christians in the Ottoman Empire, since this is the historical setting in which the icons were created. Furthermore, in both chapters two and three, there will be attention for possible answers to the question how the painter knew the story and whether or not the icons stood in a longer tradition of depicting stories in churches in the manner it was done in the Hanging Church. Contemporary sources are of great importance at this point of the research, but unfortunately these are difficult to find or they did not mention the matter of concern. Therefore it was a great challenge to obtain all the sources needed for this research and to interpret them in a proper manner. Despite all that, it was possible to draw some conclusions, which will be given at the end of this thesis. However some elements will remain unanswerable, because the sources were either not available to me or do not exist (anymore).

Chapter 1: The life of John the Baptist

The seven icons created by Yuhanna al-Armani in the Hanging Church depict the life of John the Baptist, mainly as it is known from biblical references. Only the last icon shows a different narrative, which is therefore the main concern of this thesis. In this chapter a short description of the icons will first be given, including some references to the biblical story. After that the seventh icon will be discussed more into depth and the Coptic tradition will be identified and placed next to the narrative of the icon. Until now the icons have not been fully published yet, therefore it was necessary to rely on my own interpretation only.

The seven icons are all placed within arches, which provide on the left side of each arch a short description of the particular icon. On the far right end of the series of arches, the date and signature of the painter can be found. On the icon in the middle there is also a panel containing a prayer for the welfare of the financer of the icons. Within the icons Arabic inscriptions provide information about some of the figures and items visible in the icons. Although the inscriptions are in Arabic, the painter is telling the narrative from left to right, following the writing direction as is usual in Western scripts, as well as in Coptic script.



2. *The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist.*

The first icon on the left (*image 2*) shows the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist. The angel is depicted next to an altar, while Zacharias is holding an incense burner. The painter follows here the story as it is told in Luk. 1:8-23. He has even depicted the crowd outside of the temple that is waiting for Zacharias to finish the offerings. Interesting to notice is that the painter is depicting Zacharias as an Armenian, or perhaps even Catholic, bishop instead of a Coptic bishop. There is a large difference between the cloaks of Armenian and Coptic bishops. As can be seen in the icon, the cloak Zacharias is wearing is decorated and rather colorful. He also has a miter on his head, which was common use in the Roman Catholic and Armenian traditions, but not the Coptic one. The Coptic clerical dress, however, is overall black with only a few decorations. Thus the Armenian influence in this icon is clear, but it remains to be seen why the painter choose to depict Zacharias as an Armenian bishop. After all, he was working in a Coptic church and not an Armenian. Furthermore it is known that the painter, Yuhanna al-Armani, did not work in Armenian churches or at least there is no prove that supports that he did.¹ He was probably from his own background, rather than from icons he might had produced for Armenian churches in Cairo.



3. *Mary's visit to Elisabeth.*

¹ Guirguis, M., Cairo, 2008, p. 60.

The second icon of the series depicts Mary's visit to Elisabeth. Again, the painter follows here the story as it is told in Luke 1:39-45 (*image 3*). In this icon Mary, Elisabeth, Zacharias and what appears to be Joseph are depicted. If this figure is indeed Joseph, then this might give some insight in the way people thought about women travelling alone. Although this is also just mere speculation, the painter could automatically have drawn Joseph in the scene as women were not supposed to travel alone, but should be accompanied by, for example, their husbands. It should be clear however that the idea that women should be accompanied when they travel and are not allowed to go on a journey alone was a widespread thought and still seems to be common in large parts of the world.



4. *The birth of John the Baptist.*

In the third icon (*image 4*) the birth of John the Baptist is shown. Elisabeth is lying on the bed while two figures sit next to her, while one of them is holding the child. On the far left of the icon Zacharias is writing down the name of the newborn child. Again, as in the previous icons, the painter is following the story as it is told in Luke 1:57-64. Although the two figures sitting next to Elisabeth's bed show resemblances with Joseph and Mary in the second icon, they do seem to be different persons. There is no inscription, however, to identify these two figures, but it is most likely that they resemble the neighbors or relatives who heard about the news of the birth of John the Baptist.



5. *The preaching in the desert.*

In the middle of the series of icons, on the fourth icon (*image 5*), the painter depicted John the Baptist's preaching in the desert. As was stated before, the lower left corner of the icon shows the date and signature of the painter. The writing at the bottom shows a prayer which mentions the name Obaid Abu Khouzam, who was probably the financier of the icons. The icon shows John the Baptist standing in front of a group of people, while he is preaching to them. Next to him stands a lamb, which is also depicted in the fifth icon. The preaching in the desert is also mentioned in the biblical stories, for example in Matthew 3 and Mark 1. Therefore, the painter follows yet again the biblical narrative.



6. *The baptism of Jesus Christ by John the Baptist.*

The fifth icon (*image 6*) shows the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Again this narrative can be found in the biblical stories, in Matthew 3, Luke 3 and Mark 1. The painter follows in this case a traditional way of depicting this particular story². In the middle the river Jordan is shown, with Jesus Christ being baptized by John the Baptist. The latter is standing on the side of the river, while Christ is positioned in the river itself. Also two angels are depicted on the opposite side, as well as a dove, which is flying above the head of Christ.

² There are many examples of similar depictions of the baptism in Christian art. For a Coptic example see: Cannuyer, Christian, *Coptic Egypt. The Christians of the Nile*, London, 2009, p. 79.



7. The beheading of John the Baptist and the presentation of the head at the feast.

There are multiple scenes depicted in the sixth icon (*image 7*). The beheading of John the Baptist, the presentation of his head to the king and his guests and the taking of the dead body by the followers of John the Baptist, are shown in this icon. It is clear in this case that the painter was again following the biblical story and probably wanted to show the different scenes of this episode from Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12 in one icon. Peculiar is that the daughter of Herodias is not depicted, although she is mentioned in the inscriptions. Neither Herodias is depicted, even though she was the one who had summoned her daughter to ask the king for the head of John the Baptist. Instead, only the king and probably some guests are shown, sitting at a table, while a servant is bringing the head of John the Baptist

inside. With this image the biblical narrative ends. However the painter made a seventh icon depicting a Coptic tradition. This icon, including the tradition that has been depicted will now be the main focus of this thesis.



8. A Coptic tradition narrating events after the death of John the Baptist.

The seventh icon (*image 8*) is showing a few buildings, with the head of John the Baptist shown on the higher floor on the left. Below the head, a woman is depicted while she is covered up to her waist by a hill or earth. She is also clearly pulling her hair, which indicates that she is in a for her not very satisfying situation. In the forefront, three figures stand with somewhat surprised and humble expressions on their faces, while they are looking at the events happening in front of them. The inscription on the left of the icon narrates: '*the destruction of her mother on earth (or possibly also cave)*'.³³ This is the first clue to what is depicted in this icon: the destruction or death of Herodias. Although, this is a quite acceptable conclusion in itself, it does raise an important question. Where is the death of Herodias

³³ Thanks to the translation of arabist Abdelghani al-Kairi from the University of Utrecht.

described? It does not appear in the biblical narrative, as is shown above, for it ends with the death of John the Baptist.

Using the article of W.C. Till, it was possible to search quite easily through a great number of Coptic text publications which mention John the Baptist.⁴ From this article it appears that there was a large amount of Coptic manuscripts regarding John the Baptist, indicating the great importance of the saint within the Coptic tradition. Through some of the authors mentioned in this article it is possible to even access more texts about John the Baptist. In this way one will eventually arrive at a text known under the name '*A new life of John the Baptist*', written in Arabic MS or Garshûni, which is Arabic written in Syriac script. This text was translated by Alphonse Mingana in the so-called Woodbrooke Studies in 1927, using two manuscripts of the text, which are currently kept in the Mingana Collections, under the numbers M22 and M183, which are both stored in the library of the University of Birmingham.⁵ The story attributes itself to the Egyptian bishop Serapion of Thmuis, under patriarch Theophilus. From this and the mentioning of Theodosius the Great, the story could have been written down between 385 and 395. Mingana argues however that parts of the manuscript indicate a much later date, so that Serapion was not the actual writer of the manuscript. The idea that Serapion of Thmuis was not the actual writer is supported by Klaus Fitschen, who argues that another Serapion could have been meant instead of Serapion of Thmuis.⁶ The manuscripts that Mingana used for his translation are dated at 1527 and around 1750, although this last date is uncertain, since the colophon of the manuscript is missing.⁷ This manuscript, however, was found within a collection of several manuscripts which can be dated, except for some leaves, around the year 1750.⁸ This increases then the reliability of the assumed date of 1750. Therefore it is fair to say that the text of '*A new life of John the Baptist*' was available in the eighteenth century in recently copied manuscripts. Although the story was available in the eighteenth century, Mingana does not provide any information about where the manuscripts or the collection of manuscripts was found or even where it came into being, also bearing in mind that the painter was Armenian and not Coptic. And even if the painter was Coptic, then the question to how widespread the story was, is also not answered yet. Arnoldus Van Lantschoot even makes the matter more complicated, by stating that the manuscript of 1527 was written for Egyptian Christians, while the manuscript of 1750 would have been written for Syrian Christians.⁹ However it is unclear what the base for his statement is, as both manuscripts are written in Garshûni.¹⁰ The question thus remains whether or not the text was available in Egypt in the eighteenth century. Considering that the text of 1527 would have been written for Egyptian Christians, then it could also be possible that the story was known for a longer period in Egypt and still could have been known in the eighteenth century. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine how the story, through the

⁴ Till, W.C., 1958, pp. 310-332.

⁵ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 234-287.

⁶ Fitschen, K., 1992, p. 105.

⁷ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 234-235.

⁸ Mingana, A., 1933, pp. 402-405.

⁹ Van Lantschoot, A., 1931, p. 235.

¹⁰ Mingana, A., 1933, pp. 62-68 & 402-405.

text of 1527, had reached the eighteenth century. If the text was kept in the memory of the Copts through oral transmission, then it is impossible to examine which developments or changes the story underwent. However, a Synaxarium published in the nineteenth century might shed some light on that. This will be discussed in the third chapter.

A new life of John the Baptist

Returning to the narration in the seventh icon and especially the inscription mentioning the destruction of ‘her mother’, a connection between the icon and the Serapion text can be made. The Serapion text follows the biblical story starting with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist¹¹, as is also depicted in the first icon. After this event, the story continues with the visit of Mary and the birth of John the Baptist¹², following the biblical story, which is likewise depicted in icons two and three. In the following part the story is clearly distinct from the biblical story and is neither depicted in the icons. First a reference is made to the biblical account of the murder of young children by king Herod, in order to eliminate the assumed newborn king (Christ). Elisabeth then rushes her child to the temple, where Zacharias is working, in order to hide it. An angel then tells Zacharias and Elisabeth to send the child into the desert, as the soldiers of Herod are coming to the temple to kill the child. The child is then send into the desert together with his mother, after which Zacharias is killed by the soldiers of Herod as they question him about where they can find John the Baptist. After some years also Elisabeth died.¹³ Then a miracle is described, as Elisabeth appears to Mary, while at the same time a voice is speaking to John in the desert as he is standing next to the body of Elisabeth. Then Jesus, Mary and Salome appear in front of him and together with the souls of Zacharias and Simeon, Elisabeth is buried. After these events John the Baptist was left alone in the desert to wander around, while he was praying and fasting.¹⁴ Comparing the biblical story then with the Serapion text, it needs to be said that the painter followed the biblical story as John the Baptist is depicted preaching to a group of people in the desert. The Serapion text, however, explains at this point the story of the unlawful relationship of Herod Antipas with the wife of his brother, Herodias. John the Baptist is said to be crying out each night in the desert that it was unlawful for Herod to live with the wife of his brother as long as his brother was still alive. Herod then send out soldiers to kill John the Baptist, as Herodias asked him to do, though they failed in killing him. Therefore John the Baptist continued to accuse Herod until John was around thirty years old. At this moment in the text the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist is mentioned, like it is mentioned in the biblical narrative and depicted in the icons.¹⁵ Now, the Serapion text provides in an additional story which explains how Herodias started to live with Herod. Herod had raised against his brother and brought him into discredit with emperor Caesar. Herod was then ordered to take all the property of his brother and started reigning over his region. As his brother became poorer and poorer, his wife Herodias and their daughter decided to live with Herod instead. John was told about what had happened

¹¹ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 235-237.

¹² Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 237-238.

¹³ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 238-242.

¹⁴ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 242-245.

¹⁵ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 245-247.

and accused both Herod and Herodias of having an unlawful relationship. Soon Herodias intended to kill John the Baptist, but Herod was against this. Despite that, John was captured and thrown into prison.¹⁶ Now the biblical story is picked up again, although instead of putting the guilt only at Herodias, also Herod receives a part of the blame in the Serapion text. Herodias tells Herod about her plan to have a feast in which her daughter will dance, after which Herod will ask her whatever she desires. The daughter of Herodias is then planned to ask for the head of John the Baptist, which will then result in the death of John the Baptist. Following this plan, John the Baptist eventually was beheaded.¹⁷ The events of the evening of the feast, as explained in the biblical text are depicted in the icon. So far, it is clear that the painter followed the biblical story, although the Serapion text has great comparisons with the biblical narrative. The following part of the Serapion text is of great importance for this research, since this part of the story provides elements which will later on return in a source from the first half of the nineteenth century. The Serapion text continues here with events that took place after the beheading of John the Baptist. The biblical narrative is silent on these matters. The text narrates that the head was brought in front of Herodias and that its ears and eyes were opened. Herodias then insulted the head and threatened to take out its eyes and cut off its tongue. At the moment she wanted to grab the head to do these things, the head flew up into the air, after which the roof opened and the head flew outside. The roof then collapsed onto Herodias, whose eyes were taken out. Then the earth opened itself and swallowed her up, as she was sent to hell while she was still alive. The daughter of Herodias went into a state of insanity and broke through the ice of a lake as she was dancing on it. Soldiers who were intending to save her, then cut off her head. Herod also collapsed, while the head kept crying out that it was unlawful for him to marry Herodias. The head kept doing this in Jerusalem for three years after which it flew over the entire world for fifteen years. The body of John the Baptist was soon returned to his disciples, who buried it.¹⁸ Some events that took place in which the relics of John the Baptist were moved in order to save them from destruction are told at the end of the text. The text is concluded with the account of five miracles which took place as a result of the appearance of John the Baptist, the viewing of his relics or the visiting of the church containing his relics.¹⁹

The part of the Serapion story that seems to be depicted in the final icon of the series, is actually small. As the inscription next to the icon states ‘the destruction of her mother in the earth’, it should be clear now after examining the text of the Serapion manuscript that the painter most likely knew the narration in which the destruction of Herodias is described. The earth that opens up to swallow Herodias is clearly recognizable now in the icon (*image 8*). Drawing hard conclusions from this is still difficult. Was the narration that Herodias was swallowed up by the earth an oral tradition, which was also copied into a new manuscript at the same time in the eighteenth century? Or did the story return to the minds of the people as the manuscript was again copied in the eighteenth century?

¹⁶ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 247-249.

¹⁷ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 249-251.

¹⁸ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 251-253.

¹⁹ Mingana, A., 1927, pp. 253-260.

Chapter 2: The historical context

The historical circumstances under which the icons were created and which allowed the transmission of the Serapion text will be discussed in this chapter. In this chapter, also the life of the painter will be discussed and placed within the historical context.

Although the icons were created in eighteenth-century Ottoman Egypt, it is necessary to go back a little further in time, namely to the era of the Mamluks (1250-1517). Under the Mamluks the Copts suffered from severe suppression, physical attacks and restrictions in their daily lives. The literary efforts that flourished between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries were declining rapidly under Mamluk rule. The Coptic population also suffered in numbers from the Mamluks, as their number was largely decreased by the end of Mamluk rule.²⁰ With the defeat of the Mamluks by the Ottomans, the situation of the Copts changed. The oppression decreased, but their isolation within the society was increased due to a system known as the dhimmis (non-muslims) or millet system, through which non-muslims were separated into groups based upon religion.²¹ In the early period of the Ottomans, Egypt was subjected to major political unrest and tensions, as Egypt transformed from being the center of power under the Mamluks to becoming a simple province within the large Ottoman empire. In this same early period, the Ottomans did manage to strike the Copts. The Ottomans moved not only the center of power to Istanbul, but also the intellectual and artistic center. In order to do that, they forced a great number of intellectuals and artists to migrate to Istanbul, among them being a number of talented and educated Coptic individuals. This meant that Egypt was more or less suffering from an intellectual and artistic drain, which must have been identifiable for contemporary Egyptians, including the Copts.²²

The Millet system

Although the millet system, which was already mentioned above also involved restrictions, it was not as oppressive as the regulations put by the Mamluks. Furthermore, the Copts were already used to some measures of oppression due to their experiences under Mamluk rule.²³ Within the Ottoman millet system, however, non-Muslims were granted certain rights, such as protection by Muslim rulers, professing religion and organizing their communities in the fashion they preferred. Even certain powers to rule and organize the own community were given.²⁴ Although rights on autonomy and protection were granted, some restrictions had also to be met. For example, certain types of clothes and colors should be worn by Christians, special taxes had to be paid, limitations were put on publicly expressing the faith and even physical segregation between Muslims and non-Muslims in public could take place.²⁵ It was for non-Muslims possible to bring their matters regarding personal law to the religious courts of the own millet or to choose for the sharia courts instead, which also happened often. The

²⁰ Armanios, F., 2011, pp. 15-16.

²¹ Armanios, F., 2011, p. 18.

²² Armanios, F., 2011, p. 16.

²³ Armanios, F., 2011, p. 17.

²⁴ Armanios, F., 2011, p. 17. & Abu Jaber, K.S., 1967, pp. 212-213. & Tribe, T.C., 2004, pp. 76-78.

²⁵ Armanios, F., pp. 17-18.

importance of this right to maintain the own religious courts, is that it also allowed the millets to be quite autonomous in how they organized their communities. It also enabled them to maintain their own identity, as each millet developed itself differently, creating their own distinct identities and laws.²⁶

Concerning the icons now, it should be clear that Christians under Ottoman rule had relatively large freedoms regarding their communities, which allowed the development, also religiously, of these communities. This resulted in the revival of art and building activities among Copts, which could have allowed for the creation of the kind of art that is dealt with in this thesis. The political and legal conditions in Egypt obviously allowed the painter, Yuhanna al-Armani, to work freely and produce a great number of icons, as appears from the number of icons²⁷ in different Coptic churches which have been attributed to him. According to Armanios, the Copts also maintained an active religious life, due to the fear of possible (forced) conversions and the changing socio-political climate in Egypt, especially at the beginning of the Ottoman rule.²⁸ Together with the rights granted by the millet system, this was a fruitful ground for the Copts to take their chances and establish a revival within their religious community. Despite the freedoms, there were still restrictions and prohibitions that could lead to conversions. To keep the community together Copts heavily relied on their popular religion, which became increasingly important in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁹ Elements of this popular religion are organized pilgrimages to Jerusalem³⁰, religious festivals and martyr cults, like the cult of Dimyana and the Forty Virgins³¹.

Revival in manuscript and icon production

Throughout history the four main Islamic schools of law always held the opinion of having restrictions and limitations on the restoration of existing churches and monasteries. Also the building of new churches should be limited within this opinion. From the seventeenth century onward, this policy was somewhat loosened, allowing Copts to renovate old churches and to build new ones without igniting conflicts with the local authorities.³² From then on, a large number of churches and monasteries has been renovated. Together with the revival in church and monastery renovations, a revival in several kinds of artistic production took place.³³ One of the important revivals concerning the icons being discussed in this thesis, is the revival in manuscript production. Old manuscripts were being copied or new ones were created. This increase in production, which took place all over Egypt, was closely connected to the renovation and building of churches and monasteries, in order to fill their libraries with a

²⁶ Abu Jaber, K.S., 1967, pp. 214-215.

²⁷ 148 icons painted by Yuhanna al-Armani of which are 33 in cooperation with Ibrahim al-Nasikh and 184 possibly painted by Yuhanna al-Armani of which are 8 possibly in cooperation with Ibrahim al-Nashikh. Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 80-88, for specific numbers see p. 87.

²⁸ Armanios, F., 2011, pp. 7-8.

²⁹ Armanios, F., 2011, p. 13.

³⁰ Armanios, F., 2011, pp. 91-115.

³¹ Armanios, F., 2011, pp. 65-90.

³² Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 39-40.

³³ Armanios, F., 2011, p. 10.

satisfying collection of manuscripts. Considering that one of the manuscripts of the Serapion text has been produced around the year 1750, it is fair to say that this happened as a result of the revival in manuscript production. Another interesting development is that in the same period more and more Copts started to obtain manuscripts, books and icons for the use in houses. Also Yuhanna al-Armani, the painter of the icons of John the Baptist, is known to have worked for both churches and private customers.³⁴ Often Yuhanna al-Armani is seen as the first painter who became active again after a huge historical gap in icon painting. According to Guirguis, this is not true. Already before Yuhanna al-Armani there were many painters who were active and who might have inspired Yuhanna al-Armani. Illustrated manuscripts were probably also sources of inspiration for the icon painters of the generation of Yuhanna al-Armani, as the subjects in the illustrations are often the same as the subjects in the icons.³⁵ After inquiring about the original Garshûni manuscript from the Mingana collection, known as M183 and dated around 1750, the Special Collections Department of the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, where the manuscript is kept, reported that there were unfortunately no illustrations in the manuscript. Therefore the manuscript does not provide any illustration that could have in some way inspired Yuhanna al-Armani, even indirectly, to make the final icon of the series. The business partner and possible teacher of Yuhanna al-Armani, Ibrahim al-Nasikh, is known to have worked in both fields of art: manuscript copying and illustrating and icon painting.³⁶ Could it be possible that Ibrahim al-Nasikh copied a manuscript of the Serapion text? In theory that is possible, especially considering the fact that the increase in manuscript production took place throughout the whole of Egypt and that the output of this production was massive. If Ibrahim al-Nasikh copied this manuscript, he would also have had knowledge of the story, which he could have passed on to Yuhanna al-Armani, while the latter was working on the icons. This would be a nice explanation of how Yuhanna al-Armani knew the story from a manuscript. There are some problems, however. Although it is more likely that Yuhanna al-Armani knew the story through Ibrahim al-Nasikh, for he might have copied a manuscript of the text or knew the narrative from his own Coptic background, the two men were not business partners anymore at the time the icons were created. Their last known work that they have finished together dates from 1755, while the icons concerned here were painted in 1777. However there is still a possibility, imagining the two men meeting in the street and discussing the pieces they are working on now, exchanging information at the same time. Considering the dates of the icons (1777) and the year that Ibrahim al-Nasikh died (1785) it could be possible, as Ibrahim al-Nasikh is also known to have worked until the year 1780.³⁷ However, after their last known joint work they both seemed to have had their own assistants, which made them to divide the work between themselves and the assistants, rather than between each other.³⁸

Looking again at the last icon of the destruction of Herodias (*image 8*), something should be mentioned about the work of Yuhanna al-Armani. While searching which subject was

³⁴ Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 43-44.

³⁵ Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 45-47.

³⁶ Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 46-47 & 76.

³⁷ Tribe, T.C., 2004, p. 64.

³⁸ Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 74-78.

depicted in this icon, it appeared that there was no similar icon or miniature available. Not before his time and also contemporary parallels were not available. For as long as there is no contemporary parallel work, the icon about the destruction of Herodias should be considered as unique and unconventional, as even the subject is not depicted anywhere else. Yuhanna al-Armani must have been innovative in creating the icon for this particular subject. Besides this single icon, also the series of icons seems to be an innovation, as also for a series of icons depicting the narrative of John the Baptist cannot be found in the period before Yuhanna al-Armani. Could it be that Yuhanna al-Armani was as the start of a new painting tradition?

According to T.C. Tribe, Yuhanna al-Armani and Ibrahim al-Nasikh were working together in a workshop, in which they were most likely the most important painters. Within their workshop they jointly created a style, which makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between the work of the two men. Considering their work altogether, however, it is possible to see a style that is clearly distinct from the usual styles of icon painting. The use of narration, which was not used in this way before, was extremely important for both painters. This resulted in the use of inscriptions stating the names of depicted figures and providing information about the depicted scene. In this way also the place of origin and the name of the commissioner were often integrated into the icons. This use of inscriptions is very clear in the icons of John the Baptist, as every icon has a description of the scene in the upper left corner, as well as inscriptions stating names and objects within the icons itself. The name of the commissioner can also be found, namely in the prayer which is painted below the fourth icon (*image 5*). Another important method was to place smaller scenes within the main scene to depict multiple scenes from the lives of saints within a single icon.³⁹ Some examples of this method can be found in the icons of John the Baptist. In the second icon (*image 3*) the visit of Mary to Elisabeth is depicted. In the background Zacharias and Joseph are depicted while celebrating the event. The third icon (*image 4*) shows except the birth of John the Baptist, also Zacharias who is writing down the name of John. These examples depict different scenes with only minor periods of time in between, however, the sixth icon (*image 7*) is showing multiple scenes within one icon, where there are larger spans of time between the different events in the story. In this particular icon, the beheading of John the Baptist, the offering of his head to the king and his guests, as well as the taking of the body by the disciples is shown. The painter even seems to have made a difference between the location where the separate events took place. The beheading and the taking of the body by the disciples took place in the prison, which is depicted on the left half of the icon. The prison is also recognizable as a separate building. The king and his guests however are situated at the right half of the icon, while a servant is crossing the 'border' in the middle of the icon, carrying the head of John the Baptist. Although the method of integrating multiple scenes within one icon is used in these icons, it should be noticed that the life of John the Baptist is already depicted in multiple scenes, but on separate panels. Even though the painter already depicted multiple scenes, he

³⁹ Tribe, T.C., 2004, pp. 64-66.

apparently was in need of depicting more scenes to be able to tell the complete story. Still, this way of depicting the life of John the Baptist in multiple scenes seems to be unique.⁴⁰

Tribe notices that Yuhanna al-Armani and Ibrahim al-Nasikh probably were meeting the religious needs of the people of their time. Tribe identifies the great need to have a close relationship to the divine through emotional religious experiences, which were obtained through the direct use of icons. The icons of the two painters seemed to have been made for this purpose. The use of the inscriptions made the icons suitable to meet the religious needs of the eighteenth century⁴¹, which originated in the uncertainty of the Copts about the social and political environment in which they lived.⁴² This resulted in the preference for popular religion, in which cults, icons and rituals were of great importance.⁴³

Looking at the question now if the icons of John the Baptist painted by Yuhanna al-Armani fit within an existing tradition, the answer should be no. There are no parallel icons from the same period or before. Not only the depiction of the destruction of Herodias, but also the depiction of a narrative in a series of multiple icons seems to be unique. Therefore it is fair to state that Yuhanna al-Armani was working from his own perspective, depicting a Coptic tradition. He introduced his own variation to the common practice of adding multiple scenes in a single icon, by not only adding multiple scenes, but even adding multiple icons to a series depicting elements from one narrative. In this way, he probably allowed the viewers of the icons to relive the story of John the Baptist, through which their religious needs as present at that time were met.

Yuhanna al-Armani al-Qudsi

Considering the question again how the painter knew the story, it is also interesting to take a brief look at his life. As an Armenian, Yuhanna al-Armani al-Qudsi was a member of the Armenian community of Cairo. There is not much known about the Armenian community during Ottoman rule in Egypt. What is known about the community is that it was not situated into a hierarchy with the community of Jerusalem, but was rather functioning on its own.⁴⁴ The community settled in Egypt already a long time before the Ottomans arrived, namely in the eleventh century at the time of an Armenian Fatimid vizier. Due to the long period that Armenians had lived in Egypt, they became well-integrated into Egyptian society and maintained good relations with the Copts. Although most Armenians were among the most poor of Egypt, it is known that some of the children of Yuhanna al-Armani managed to live a relatively wealthy life.⁴⁵ Yuhanna al-Armani's father, who came from Jerusalem (from where the family derives the name al-Qudsi, which they sometimes used), probably arrived to Egypt at the end of the seventeenth or beginning of the eighteenth century, bringing with him his

⁴⁰ For more information about the styles used by Yuhanna al-Armani and his partner Ibrahim al-Nasikh, please see: P. van Moorsel, M. Immerzeel, L. Langen, *Catalogue Général du Musée Copte. The Icons*, Cairo 1994, pp. 16-47.

⁴¹ Tribe, T.C., 2004, pp. 66-67.

⁴² Tribe, T.C., 2004, p. 67. & Armanios, F., 2011, pp. 7-8.

⁴³ Armanios, F., 2011, pp. 6-7, 13.

⁴⁴ Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 49-51.

⁴⁵ Armanios, F., 2011, p. 20. & Guirguis, M., p. 63.

two sons Yuhanna and Salib. In Egypt Yuhanna married to a Coptic woman, with who he had three sons and one daughter. After the death of his first wife he remarried to another Coptic woman.⁴⁶ This is where the closest connection between Yuhanna al-Armani and the Coptic Church is situated, namely in his two marriages with Coptic women. As Armenians are not known for keeping icons and creating cults around them, the painter must have gotten his knowledge about (Coptic) saints, their icons and cults from somewhere else. Possibly he learnt the Coptic traditions belonging to the saints through one of his wives, but also the social relations with Copts in general could have provided him with this knowledge.⁴⁷ Another important source could have been Ibrahim al-Nasikh, his business partner and possibly also his teacher in (Coptic) icon painting. Of course it is also possible that Yuhanna al-Armani did not know any of the stories of the saints he was painting, or only the narratives that he knew through the Armenian church. Without knowing the stories or the saints he could still have painted the icons if he had workbooks with sketches or general outlines in his possession, as sketchbooks were often available to painters and illustrators.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 62-63.

⁴⁷ Guirguis, M., 2008, pp. 58-60.

⁴⁸ Tribe, T.C., 2004, pp. 69-70.

Chapter 3: Contemporary sources

There is still one category of sources that could provide some information to how Yuhanna al-Armani came to creating the icons in the way that he did. The best source would be a source that was left behind by the painter himself. Unfortunately no private documents or notes of Yuhanna al-Armani have been preserved.⁴⁹ Therefore it is impossible to rely on notes regarding the production of his icons and to determine the exact circumstances of the time of creation.

Other sources that could be helpful are travel-journals and scientific reports of the time. Unfortunately the reports from the eighteenth century and later did not pay any attention on the icons in the Hanging Church. Researchers and travelers only seemed to have been interested in the carved woodwork, which was much older than the icons in the church. For us now this seems to be strange perhaps, but actually looking at the attitude nowadays, most research is also done about the 'old' things. One only has to compare the number of studies on 'ancient' art with the number of studies on modern art. Perhaps in any century people are not very interested in the contemporary art, but tend to focus on the old pieces. This could explain the attitude of the researchers at the time, who simply skipped the new pieces and focused on the old ones. But we should bear in mind we are also 'guilty' of doing the same thing.

One group of researchers who could be expected to describe anything they would see in Egypt as they had the mission to describe all the aspects of a for them entirely new country, are the group of researchers and scientists who accompanied Napoleon. Unfortunately, however, even this group of scientists did not describe the churches in Old Cairo. The edition discussing modern Egypt⁵⁰ only gives a description of which buildings or monuments can be found in the area. The edition discussing ancient Egypt does mention the church in which the icons of John the Baptist can be found, but unfortunately the article only gives a short explanation of the name of the church, which is also called the Church of the Holy Virgin.⁵¹

Someone who did mention some of the icons inside the Hanging Church was Alfred Joshua Butler in 1884, a good one hundred years after the icons were created. Also Butler is mostly describing the woodwork and architectural features of the church and not the icons.⁵² When he describes the iconostasis, where the icons are located, he mentions some of the icons in this area of the church. However, he is not very impressed by the icons in the church, as he almost complains that almost everything in the church is new or modern.⁵³

Synaxarium

Recalling the Serapion text, which narrates the life of John the Baptist according to a Coptic tradition, it is reasonable to ask whether this text or the narrative itself was widespread in the

⁴⁹ Guirguis, M., 2008, p. 61.

⁵⁰ Conté, N.J., 1822, pp.741-744.

⁵¹ Du Bois-Aymé, M., 1818, p. 99-104.

⁵² Butler, A.J., 1884, pp. 206-224.

⁵³ Butler, A.J., 1884, pp. 219-224.

eighteenth century or not. To determine this it is necessary to examine other contemporary sources. However, as stated before, sources are limited for this period and not every source is accessible. The most helpful source at this moment is the Coptic Synaxarium, the calendar with the celebrations or remembrance days and the lives of the Coptic saints. During the eighteenth century there was a standardized form of the Synaxarium, as the first Coptic Synaxarium was compiled around the year 1247, when the Coptic church leaders tried to organize the huge amount of hagiographies and other narrations concerning the saints. This Synaxarium has been copied since then and several eighteenth-century copies are still known to exist today.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, I was not able to view one of the eighteenth-century copies, but I did manage to examine a German translation of a copy from the first half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ This copy was commissioned by a monk who gifted it to the monastery of Anba Bishoy in the year 1826.⁵⁶ Concerning the seventh icon (*image 8*) of the series, the thirtieth day of the Coptic month Amshir is interesting. Recalling ‘*A new life of John the Baptist*’, Herodias was swallowed by the earth, her daughter died in a lake and Herod collapsed. In the Synaxarium the story is completely different on the day of thirty Amshir. On this day the Synaxarium narrates that after John the Baptist was beheaded, Herod took the head and hid it in his palace. A war ignited between Herod and Arata, as the latter found out that Herod left his daughter to marry Herodias. Soon emperor Tiberius heard that the wars ignited because of the murder of a prophet, John the Baptist. Tiberius then banned Herod and his palace was turned into ruins. Herod was sent to Andalusia (Spain), where he died.⁵⁷ This is a very different ending of the story in the Serapion text. The second day of the Coptic month Tut, sheds a different light on the story. The first part of the story follows the biblical narrative of the martyrdom of John the Baptist. The final part, however, connects to the Serapion text, as it narrates that the head flew up into the air after it was cut off and that it cried out that it was unlawful for Herod to marry the wife of his brother, while his brother was still alive.⁵⁸ Not only the flying head, but also the place where it came to rest, namely in Homs is mentioned in both the Synaxarium⁵⁹ and the Serapion text⁶⁰. What follows from this is that the tradition as narrated in the Serapion text was more or less widely known, due to the fact that it also appears in the Synaxarium. Peculiar at the same time, is that the icon shows a scene from the Serapion text, which does not appear in the Synaxarium and where the Synaxarium even has a completely different narrative of what happened after the beheading of John the Baptist. It is fair though, to state that the Serapion tradition must have been (partly) known in the eighteenth century. If the tradition of the flying head also appeared in copies of the Synaxarium before the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries is not possible for me to determine, as I was unable to access such copies. But, if this is the case, then the tradition of the flying head was brought down to the

⁵⁴ Tribe, T.C., 2004, p. 86.

⁵⁵ Wüstenfeld, F., 1879.

⁵⁶ Wüstenfeld, F., 1879, p. 323.

⁵⁷ Wüstenfeld, F., 1879, pp. 321-323.

⁵⁸ Wüstenfeld, F., 1879, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁹ Wüstenfeld, F., 1879, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Mingana, A., 1927, p. 253.

eighteenth century through the Synaxarium and less likely through the Serapion text, although this text clearly has appeared in the eighteenth century. The Serapion text has even manifested itself in the icon of Yuhanna al-Armani. Another option is still that the tradition as narrated in the Serapion text was transmitted orally, as this was also common practice among the Copts.⁶¹ Possibly, the process of oral transmission could have been helped by the icons of Yuhanna al-Armani, as icons played an important role within the liturgy of the church and as a way to tell and re-tell stories of the saints. Often people would stand in front of the icons to explain the story to each other.⁶² The icons of Yuhanna al-Armani could thus well have been used liturgically, although there would have been a discrepancy between the seventh icon and the thirtieth day of the month Amshir of the Synaxarium, in case the text of the Synaxarium was used. The possibility that the painter knew the story from oral tradition is also still possible, as written text and oral tradition were standing next to each other, as has already been mentioned before.

⁶¹ Tribe, T.C., 2004, p. 87.

⁶² Tribe, T.C., 2004, p. 87.

Conclusions

Returning to the questions asked in the introduction, it is possible to give some answers now. The first question was which story had been depicted in the seventh icon of the series. After examining the translation of the inscription next to the icon and paralleling this with the text of '*A new life of John the Baptist*', it was relatively easy to identify an existing tradition that was narrating the destruction of Herodias as depicted in the icon. How widespread this tradition was and how the painter of the series exactly knew the story remains difficult to determine. It appears in a different form in the standardized Synaxarium in the nineteenth century, which was most likely a copy of an older version.

The manuscript production, which was boosted by the freedoms obtained through the millet system, was important for the reproduction of ancient manuscripts. The freedom to profess and organize the own religion within the millet system, made it possible that a revival in art production could take place and was not affected by legal restrictions. It is very likely that the copy of the Serapion text was copied due to these circumstances. Also the creation of the icons must be seen in this context, as it was relatively easy to produce religious objects under Ottoman rule, opposed to the situation under Mamluk rule. As the increase in manuscript production most likely provided the manuscript, or a multitude of similar manuscripts, from which Yuhanna al-Armani could have learnt the story, applying it to the series of icons that he was making at the time.

The greater freedoms that Christians enjoyed within the Ottoman empire allowed Yuhanna al-Armani and Ibrahim al-Nasikh to work freely and create a style that was meeting the religious needs of their clientele. As the use of workbooks or sketchbooks with examples was common in this period, as well as the trade in these books, it is possible that Yuhanna al-Armani used a sketchbook to depict the scene of the destruction of Herodias. In theory this is possible, but in reality it is unlikely. If the composition was taken from a sketchbook, which normally contained standardized examples of how to depict certain saints and narratives, then more similar icons should be available. Until now, however, I have not been able to find a similar composition or even the depiction of the narrative of the destruction of Herodias by itself.

The integration of the Armenians into Egyptian society helped to maintain close social relations with Copts, which could have led to the exchange of stories of saints. Through these relations, but especially through his marriages with the two Coptic women and his artistic relationship with Ibrahim al-Nasikh, Yuhanna al-Armani would have had easy access to the narratives of saints. In any case, Yuhanna al-Armani must have obtained his knowledge about saints and their cults through Copts, as Armenians are not known to have cults around icons or numerous saints. Therefore it is unlikely that Yuhanna al-Armani drew from his own Armenian background.

Eventually, the most likely way through which the painter learnt to know the story that he depicted, was through either a copy of a manuscript of the Serapion text or through the oral transmission of this story, which would have existed parallel to the official Synaxarium. The oral transmission, however, was probably only accessible to Yuhanna al-Armani through his

relations with Copts and his wives, for the Armenian church obviously did not provide in this. It is still important to bear in mind that the socio-political conditions of the Ottoman empire helped in the transmission of the story, either through the increase in art and manuscript production or through the freedom granted to the Christians to fashion and profess their religion in the manner they preferred.

Some questions, however, still remain at the end of this research. Was the element from the Serapion text, namely the flying head, already established in the Synaxarium before the nineteenth century copy that has been discussed in this thesis? In other words, did the flying head become part of the Synaxarium before the revival in manuscript production or due to this increased production? Regarding the painter, the question still remains, how exactly did he learn about the story in the way that he later on depicted it in the icon? This thesis provided in some suggestions as to what was the most likely source for the painter to learn about the narrative, but more research seems to be necessary to determine what were the sources of knowledge for artists who were working for commissioners from outside their religious group, depicting subjects that were unique for the other group. A clear example of this is the depiction of the destruction of Herodias, as we have seen it in the icon made by Yuhanna al-Armani, as even within the Coptic community it seems to be a unique composition. In short, an Armenian painter who was well-integrated into the Coptic community, created a composition which so far seems to be unique within the Coptic tradition, which opens the opportunity for further research into the exchange of narratives between one religious group and artists from another religious group.

List of illustrations

All photographs have been taken by the author of this thesis during the period 2009-2010 in the Hanging Church in Cairo, Egypt.

1. The fieldwork in progress in the Hanging Church in Cairo, with an impression of the location of the icons in the Hanging Church.
2. The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist.
3. Mary's visit to Elisabeth.
4. The birth of John the Baptist.
5. The preaching in the desert.
6. The baptism of Jesus Christ by John the Baptist.
7. The beheading of John the Baptist and the presentation of the head at the feast.
8. A Coptic tradition narrating events after the death of John the Baptist.

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