CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: RADIANCE AND REFLECTION: CHRYSOGRAPHY IN BYZANTINE ICONS

The following text is quoted from a commentary written by Professor George Galavaris for the Icon Calendar of the Year 2000 published for the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. Dr. Galavaris provides an introduction to the idea and function of the icon and the importance of divine light in the Orthodox world which is a worthy and relevant way to begin this study.

> The icon, belonging to the arts which materialize the Divine Liturgy, opens to the faithful a window toward heaven so that he may confront the Divine and perceive, as far as this is possible to man, the Divine Beauty. This role of the icon derives from the great event that marked and divided the history of mankind two millennia ago – the third just begins: the descent of Christ on earth in human form. Before His coming man lived under the law given by Moses; with Christ came grace and truth and human nature was imbued with divine life and divine beauty, which made possible the redemption of matter. Matter can become spirit. And the icon, made of wood and pigments, is bearer of the spirit. This is the great meaning of the *Incarnation*.
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> God descends so that man may ascend. God, the creator of all, assumes the form of man in order to save man from matter, from sin, the ignorance of truth, and to bring him in the realm of light. Man, son of God by adoption, made in the image and likeness of God, born in immortality fell from it willingly into the darkness of non-being and death. But man had to be redeemed and become participant in the glory of God. This

was achieved by the Incarnation, the divine descent made manifest in the Annunciation, the joy of the Christmas night, the suffering on the cross, the light of the resurrected body of Christ, his ascent in heavens, and the kingdom of God on earth.

Christ is nailed on the Cross for man and his death becomes a source of life for the faithful who believe in him. . . . After the suffering of the Cross, comes the light and certainty of the Resurrection. Death and destruction cannot triumph. Death is put to death and humanity under the Law and under Grace is redeemed from darkness. The way to a life of light is now open. The kingdom of God may come on earth.

The redeemed man, work of God's hands, can follow a way of life, which is to lead him to a union with God. Man becomes now a pilgrim on the road of light which is the light of the *Transfiguration* in which the promise given to the prophet Elijah that he will see the face of God was fulfilled. . . . The pilgrim's road leading to the vision of light is laborious, full of tears of penitence, contrition, ascesis, and martyrdom. But the power of love is great. Love is an abyss of illumination, the progress of eternity, says St. John Climachus. Infinite is also the mercy of God whom the faithful begs "Lord, keep us under the shadow of thy wings." In the words of Cosmas, bishop of Maiuma (7th c.), Christ is the guide: "O thou who didst disseminate the primeval radiance of the light, that thy works might sing thee in the light, O Christ, their creator, guide our paths in thy light" (Canon of the Transfiguration). The faithful prays for salvation, for the completion of the journey, for the return of man to God. He has as intercessors the Mother of God and John the Forerunner, witnesses of the Incarnation . . .

Light is the main feature of the saints who inhabit the kingdom of God. But this light has nothing to do with physical reality for it is the light that emanates from God. And in this manner it is depicted on the icons where all outward beauty is rejected so that the represented holy figures and the world, landscape with trees, flowers, and animals are shown in a transfigured state. This is the language of the icon that conveys the divine message to all. Those who venerate icons and can hear their message, can understand the words of Symeon the New Theologian:

I receive his light, I become participant in his glory,
And my face shines as that of my beloved,
And all my limbs become bearers of light,
And I am more beautiful than the beautiful ones,
Richer than the rich, stronger
Than all the mighty and greater than a king. (Hymn 7)[1]

THE BYZANTINE IMAGE OF THE VIRGIN AND CHILD ENTHRONED AND THE USE OF CHRYSOGRAPHY

One of the most important pre-iconoclastic icons that survives in the collection of the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai is the sixth-century image of

the Virgin and Child enthroned with two standing soldier saints, Theodore and George (Plate 1).[2] Above and behind the Virgin a large ray of light descends from the hand of God, flanked by two archangels, to indicate the divine presence of Jesus seated in the lap of Mary. This image, and other contemporary images comparable to it from both the east and the west, demonstrates the importance of the cult of the Virgin *Theotokos* in this early period. And it is notable that Mary is represented as a full-length enthroned figure. Among other examples, from the east there is also the magnificent sixth-century tapestry with the Virgin and Child enthroned with angels, originally done in Egypt and now in the Cleveland Museum of Art.[3] From the west we find the fresco from the Roman catacomb of Commodilla with the Virgin and Child enthroned between two standing male saints, Felix and Adauctus, with the donor figure of the widow, Turtura, dated A.D. 528,[4] and the large sixth-century icon of the Virgin and Child enthroned in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome with a male ecclesiastical donor figure at the lower right.[5]

The Council of Ephesus had defined the Virgin Mary as the *Theotokos* in 431. And after this time her cult developed rapidly with remarkably sophisticated imagery found already in the sixth-century images mentioned above. Indeed it was in the sixth century that the cult of the Virgin first reached its full development, and apparently the specific imagery of the Virgin and Child enthroned with angels was invented at this time.[6] Although certain core elements are found in all of these icons, that is, the Virgin wearing royal garments and seated on some kind of a jeweled throne holding the Child in her lap, there are certain important variations already found that distinguish images from the east from some of those in the west. In the Sinai icon, the Virgin *Theotokos* wears a purple *chiton* and a purple *maphorion* with a light blue and white coif and red purple shoes. She is given a gold cross-star on the forehead of her *maphorion*. She holds the Child Jesus securely with both hands. He is seated in her lap, blessing and holding a scroll; his ocher himation and *chiton* are both given golden highlights. Both Mary and Jesus have large golden haloes and the throne is painted gold with pearls and jewels. In the Egyptian tapestry the Virgin again wears a purple *chiton* and a purple *maphorion* with a white coif, and very dark black shoes. But here she is given a small equal-armed red cross on the coif. Jesus again wears a golden colored garment, and whereas the Virgin has a large halo, Jesus has none. In this case her golden throne has received precious inlaid stones along with copious pearls.

In the contemporary western examples from Rome, the fresco from the chapel in the Commodilla catacomb features the purple clad Virgin *Theotokos* who wears a white coif and red shoes seated on a pearl and jewel-studded throne. Jesus wears golden garments seated in her lap while holding a scroll; both Mary and Jesus have golden haloes. By contrast the Santa Maria in the

Trastevere icon, a work known as the *Madonna della Clemenza*, shows the Virgin wearing pearl-embroidered decoration on the entire upper torso of her purple garment, along with a pearl-studded crown with *pendulia*. The Child's garments –also purple – appear to have been painted golden, but the damaged condition of the icon makes it very difficult to see. Both the Virgin and the Child have golden haloes. As compared to the other examples, the Virgin only holds the Child on her lap with one hand, while the other is raised to hold a cross staff. There can be no doubt that here the Virgin is depicted as the queen of heaven, a title – "Regina Coeli"– she received in an inscription for another slightly earlier fresco in Santa Maria Antiqua.[7] This imagery of the crowned Virgin found frequently at this early period in Rome is not used in Byzantium, or at least is quite uncommon,[8] but the partially surviving inscription on the frame of this panel makes clear another important aspect about this image, which is also found in the east. The inscription reads, "The chiefs of the angels stand astonished at the birth of the child, for God himself has become [man]."[9] The specification of the Christ Child as divine and human is indicated in this icon and in the Santa Maria in the Trastevere icon by his golden garments.

This same artistic device is used in the east at this time. Mathews cites an inscription for the frame of a no longer extant icon now included in the *Greek Anthology* as follows: "My queen, you hold in your arms your Child, God's all-embracing Son, at whom the angels shiver in awe. Make him gentle in heart toward mankind, and thus preserve from calamity the whole world."[10] Mathews then goes on to make the following interesting suggestion: "The icon this inscription once enframed is now lost, but the text would perfectly suit the Sinai icon of this subject [cited above, cf. Note 1], which has lost its frame."[11] "The prayer seeks Mary's intercession with her son, who holds the safety of the world in his arms. If the Sinai icon were Justinian's votive offering on the occasion of the dedication of the Monastery to the Mother of God, it might appropriately have carried such an inscription for the safety of the world, over which Justinian claimed universal earthly dominion."[12]

Jesus, the God-man, is of course given in effect golden garments in the Sinai icon, as apparently he is in all the others cited here, that is, either golden garments, golden-colored garments, or ocher-colored garments covered with chrysography (= golden highlighting). What is also clear in all of these examples is that Mary, who is given purple garments, is *not* given golden garments nor is chrysography employed for her image.[13] She is consistently represented as the human "Mother of God" most often wearing a purple *chiton* and a *maphorion*.[14] These examples demonstrate that the appearance of full-length images of the Virgin and Child enthroned with Jesus in golden garments and flanked by angels in major icons at least as early as the sixth century is an important feature of pre-iconoclastic imagery both east and west. These

icons served in various liturgical, funerary, and possibly dedicatory functions as commissioned by various aristocratic, ecclesiastical, or papal donors.

Other examples of these images were also found in prominent locations on the walls and vaults of Christian churches both before and after the iconoclastic controversy, but fewer examples survive from before 730 because of the destruction of so many images between 730 and 843.[15] It is not our purpose to document these monuments here, but only to draw a basic parallel between the icons mentioned above and the imagery of the Virgin and Child enthroned found in these monumental examples. The appearance of large and important public images of the Virgin and Child enthroned is an important example. They were placed in the main eastern apses of newly built Christian churches and this practice effectively started with the apse of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, begun soon after 432 by pope Sixtus III. Although sadly that original mosaic is lost,[16] textual evidence at least allows us to know that the image contained a Virgin and Child enthroned flanked by the pope and five martyr saints.[17] Fortunately, a few extant examples can still be found in the sixth century, which allow us to see what characterized the imagery of these early examples. In the west we find the apse mosaic of the Basilica Euphrasiana from Parenzo (Porec) in Istria, done about 550. In the east there are two sixth-century examples on Cyprus: fragmentary remains in the apse of the church of the Virgin Kanakaria at Lythrankomi, and a beautiful apse mosaic in the little church of the Virgin Angeloktisti at Kition.

The overall program of the Parenzo apse mosaic is distinct from, for example, the Sinai icon of the Virgin and Child enthroned discussed above, but the basic representation of the Virgin and Child is comparable. At Parenzo, the Virgin *Theotokos* is seated on a jeweled backless throne wearing purple garments and holding the Christ in her lap with both hands. Jesus appears in a radiant white *chiton* with a golden himation, blessing and holding a scroll. Both figures have golden haloes, and now the cross halo of Christ, only faintly visible in the Sinai icon, is quite pronounced. At Lythrankomi the mosaic is quite damaged, but the basic formula of the Virgin *Theotokos* wearing purple garments enthroned on a jeweled throne with Jesus seated in her lap is clear.[18] In this case Jesus has a gold cross nimbus, wears a golden himation, and holds a scroll. By contrast the apse mosaic at Kiti is in excellent condition, but here she is standing and holding the Christ Child with a gesture comparable to the venerable type known as the Virgin *Hodegetria*. Nonetheless the basic formula for their garments seen elsewhere is found here as well. The Virgin wears purple garments; Jesus wears a golden *chiton* and himation, he blesses and holds a scroll, and he has a gold cross nimbus.

During the iconoclastic controversy many images of the Virgin and Child as the central apse decoration of Byzantine churches were destroyed or severely damaged; one very important example is in the church of the Koimesis at

Nicaea (the monastery of Hyakinthos).[19] This case is significant of course because when iconoclasm ended, this church apse was apparently the first with figural mosaics before 730 to have been redecorated. Indeed as Cormack points out, the pre-iconoclastic imagery of the apse was minutely reinstated.[20] Before this monument was wantonly destroyed in 1920, there was a monumental standing Virgin in a purple *maphorion* with a gold cross emblem on her forehead and both shoulders, and a gold hem on the *maphorion* surrounding her face, holding the Child Jesus in both hands. Jesus, wearing golden garments and holding a scroll in his proper left hand, blesses in the eastern manner. Mary has a golden halo, and Jesus has a cross nimbus. The only other detail here of note is the kerchief the Virgin holds in her proper left hand as she presses Jesus against her. This is reminiscent of the kerchief found held by the Virgin enthroned in the fresco found in the Commodilla catacomb in Rome. And another link to sixth-century ideas in this recreated mosaic is the hand of God above the Virgin and Jesus, with three rays of light descending below, one of which falls on the head of the Virgin. The inscription says, "Thou has conceived Him before Time,"[21] once again referring to the image of the *Theotokos* as we saw it in the Sinai icon of the Virgin and Child enthroned discussed above.

The Nicaea mosaic with its standing Virgin holding the Child echoed the pre-iconoclastic example from Kition in Cyprus, albeit with changes in the position of the Child and the hands of the Virgin, but the main difference was the elimination of the flanking angels found in the earlier composition. The new composition isolated the Virgin and Child against the glowing golden expanse of the apse ground. And the majority of post-iconoclastic apse images featured the enthroned Virgin and Child as found in the next major monument to be restored, namely that of the church of Haghia Sophia in Constantinople. On 29 March, Holy Saturday in 867, the patriarch Photios delivered his homily on the occasion of the inauguration of the new image. Cormack comments on its eloquence and content: "He [Photios] speaks sometimes of the theological ideas communicated by the mosaic, sometimes of the intellectual power of art, sometimes of the pure emotional effect of the image on the viewer in the church."[22] Despite some of the details of the descriptive language of the *ekphraseis* found in his homily, for example, "a virgin mother carrying in her pure arms, for the common salvation of our kind, the common Creator reclining as an infant," "she fondly turns her eyes on her begotten Child in the affection of her heart," and "the Virgin is holding the Creator in her arms as an infant,"[23] the image we see today, that is, the Virgin and Child enthroned on a backless jeweled throne, is in all likelihood the very one celebrated as the first image to be "restored" in the church.[24] It was located beneath a large mosaic inscription which reads: "The images which the impostors had formerly cast down here, pious emperors have again set up."[25]

The details of this icon seen today clearly show that this newly created image in 867 marking the end of iconoclasm and found in the main eastern apse of

Haghia Sophia remained true to the basic representation of the *Theotokos* found before iconoclasm.[26] The Virgin wears a purple *chiton* and *maphorion* with gold cross emblems on her forehead and shoulders and gold fringe on the lower right hem. She also has a white coif under the veil of her *maphorion* and a golden halo bordered in red, comparable in color to her red shoes. Jesus sits upright in her lap in a magnificent golden *chiton*; he is gently held in place by her hands, which rest on his proper right shoulder and his lower left knee. She holds a kerchief in her proper left hand that rests on his knee. The one special feature to be noted here is the fact that the curly hair of the Child Jesus is also given chrysography.[27] In sum, what we see is the representation of Jesus who said, "I am the light of the world" (John 1:9). He is "a light-emitting, divine figure, in contrast to the Virgin," who as the human Mother of God, appears without divine radiance.[28]

The Haghia Sophia image was important in Byzantium both because of its "restoration" of the image of the Mother of God in the central apse over the main altar of the great church in Constantinople, but also as a model for new mosaic images to be found in middle Byzantine churches erected between 867 and 1204.[29] Some of these churches adopted the enthroned *Theotokos* as their main apsidal composition, those for example, at St. Sophia in Thessaloniki and at the Katholikon of the monastery of Hosios Lukas in Phokis, both done in the eleventh century.[30] Other churches adopted the standing Virgin holding the Child as we have seen at Kiti or at Nicaea, and one significant example is found in the apse of the eleventh-century cathedral of St. Mary Assunta at Torcello in the Venetian lagoon. Here in a major example of Byzantine mosaic art in the west we find a monumental image of the Virgin who appears with Christ both as the *Theotokos* and indicating Jesus as in the *Hodegetria* icon by her gesture, that is, the way to salvation. With regard to this mosaic Cormack remarks that this "image is a declaration that the Mother of God, the protectress of Constantinople, is also the support and refuge of Venice."[31] Not all enthroned images of the Virgin and Child in Byzantine churches during the middle period (867–1204) were of the *Hodegetria* type. See, for example, the images at the church of St. George in Kurbinovo (1191), at the church of the Panagia tou Arakou near Lagoudera on Cyprus (c. 1192),[32] or at the church of the Monastery of St. John the Divine on Patmos (c. 1200),[33] all of which, however, follow the standard presentation of Jesus in gold held by or presented by the Virgin *Theotokos*, who wears her purple/blue *maphorion* without chrysography as was generally customary in Byzantium.

Looking at these selected examples of apsidal compositions after iconoclasm, chosen mostly from the eleventh century, the fact is that they are representative of the way that the Virgin was often depicted as enthroned with Jesus. But whether enthroned or standing, we note that consistently, where Jesus wears his golden garments as an indication of his divine nature manifested as the God-man, Mary wears her purple/blue *chiton* and *maphorion* as the *Theotokos*,

the human Mother of God. She has no divine radiance. As Henry Maguire has argued, "she is the mother of Christ and has a special closeness to him. The human bonds between Christ and his mother were seen by Byzantine viewers as a guarantee of the strength of her intercession on their behalf."[34] Robin Cormack also observes that after iconoclasm, "less importance was attached to the majestic role of the Virgin as the vessel of the divine, and more to her motherhood and receptiveness to prayer."[35]

Why was she depicted the way we see her in the middle Byzantine period (843–1204), starting effectively in the apse at Haghia Sophia? The theological importance of placing an image of the Virgin *Theotokos* with the Child Jesus enthroned in the main apse of the great church of Haghia Sophia in Constantinople in 867 to mark the triumph of Orthodoxy over the iconoclasts is clear.[36] And it is important to note that the imagery of the Virgin and Child enthroned in this image is significant for setting the standard for the depiction of the Virgin in her purple garments as the human mother of Jesus, for a variety of reasons. Not only is the Virgin depicted as the *Theotokos,* but also in appearance she is linked by tradition to the holy relic of her robe[37] preserved in the Blachernai monastery and taken to Haghia Sophia in solemn ceremonial procession in times of danger. The robe of the Virgin had been acquired for Constantinople in the fifth century and celebrated with imperial support already in the sixth and seventh centuries, before iconoclasm.[38] Belief in the relic was one aspect of the expanding cult of the Virgin, temporarily paused during iconoclasm, of which the new apse mosaic in Haghia Sophia was a major new statement in 867. This image was joined by the new interest in smaller, portable icons of the Virgin, some of which were said to be miraculous, and one such icon of the greatest significance was that of the Virgin *Hodegetria*.[39]

It must be said, of course, that a number of portable icons with types of the Virgin were continued and identified with inscriptions, or created in the post-iconoclastic period. For our discussion here it is not important to attempt to identify the place of origin and the date of each of these types. Some well-known examples are the following. There is the Virgin *Blachernitissa*, a miraculous icon of the Virgin and Child said to be in the Monastery of Blachernai in Constantinople in the eighth century. The fact is that several different icons came to be identified in the Blachernai in the middle Byzantine period, including also what are called by the following names: the Virgin *Platytera*, the Virgin *Episkepsis*, the Virgin *Nikopoios*, and the Virgin *Eleousa*. Another important type is the Virgin *Galaktotrophousa*, which emerged in the pre-iconoclastic period in Egypt. And there are others we need not introduce here. The important fact is that most of these portable icons of the Virgin focus on her role as the *Theotokos*, that is, as the Mother of God. Thus, they emphasize Mary's role in the incarnation of Christ. The types differ essentially

in the way that Mary and Jesus are specifically related to and responding to each other. It is also an important fact that for these various types with the Virgin and Child in portable Byzantine icons, the Child Jesus is usually wearing golden garments, or garments with copious chrysography, whereas the Virgin is wearing her purple/blue *maphorion* over a coif with a *chiton* or tunic underneath, and perhaps some golden ornament on the *maphorion*, but without golden highlighting.[40]

Of all these types it is,however, the *Hodegetria* which is the most significant and the most widespread. Not only was this a miraculous icon housed in the monastery of the Hodegon in Constantinople by the twelfth century, it was also by that time said to have been painted by the evangelist Luke.[41] According to the story, it was the Empress Pulcheria (399–453) who was responsible for bringing the icon to Constantinople.[42] In the representation on this icon the Virgin carries the Child Jesus, who is usually blessing and holding a scroll, on her proper left arm, and gestures toward him with her right hand as the way to salvation while she looks off in the distance, or sometimes looks directly out at the viewer. There is also a significant variant for this type known as the *Hodegetria Dexiokratousa*, in which the position of the Child is located on her proper right arm and she gestures with her left hand toward him. This type of image of the Virgin is known before iconoclasm, and is found on patriarchal seals in Constantinople from the ninth century on. The term *Hodegetria* first appears on seals of the eleventh century.[43]

The icon of the Virgin *Hodegetria* in the middle Byzantine period was an icon type with three important features: first, it was an icon of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child, that is, likenesses of Jesus and his Holy Mother, an image of the greatest holiness. Second, it was an icon the original of which was said to have been painted by St. Luke. Thus it was given special importance by the belief that the original icon of this type dated from the time of Christ when the evangelist Luke painted this holy image of Mary and Jesus.[44] It was this original icon that was believed to have survived and was kept in the monastery of the Hodegon, from which it derived its name.[45] Third, this icon, because the image it contained was so holy, precious, and venerable, was considered miraculous. Because of its miraculous powers, it functioned as a palladium of Constantinople to protect the city. It was also the object of intense public veneration in the middle Byzantine period which was manifested in various ways. First, at court there was its participation in liturgical rites during Lent up to Easter in the imperial palace. Second, it appeared in processions in connection with the *Akathistos* hymn. The *Akathistos* hymn, composed originally in the sixth century by Romanos, later became the most popular Byzantine devotional hymn to the Virgin. Verses one to twelve deal with the Annunciation and the childhood of Christ; verses twelve to twenty-four, Christ as *salvator mundi* and with Mary as his mother.[46] During the hymn the worshippers sing,

"Hail, Virgin Mother." Cormack points out that through this hymn, and of course, through the image of the Virgin *Hodegetria*, the Byzantines "became accustomed to the idea that the Virgin was among the human beings the closest to God."[47] Third, the *Hodegetria* icon also became prominent because of its regular appearance in the Tuesday liturgical processions.[48]

The icon of the Virgin *Hodegetria* is identified to be "the most widely copied of all types of the Virgin" in Byzantine art.[49] Indeed it was even recognized as such in the thirteenth century by Pope Innocent III who stated that "it was the most venerated icon in all *Graecia*" attesting to the awareness in the west of its special significance.[50] In light of its importance, we must pay close attention to details of its specific iconography in Byzantine art.[51] First of all, the Virgin *Hodegetria* as a type may be recognized primarily in representations of the Virgin and Child in bust-length or, much less frequently, standing full-length. Although there were icons of the full-length seated *Hodegetria* in the pre-iconoclastic period, in the post-iconoclastic period the Virgin and Child *Hodegetria* enthroned "was never generally accepted in Byzantium,"[52] at least not up until about 1300. And although the original cult icon identified as the Virgin *Hodegetria* painted by St. Luke was destroyed when the Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453, we know a great deal about what it looked like because we have a number of later surviving images which purport to show the original *Hodegetria* icon being carried in procession,[53] and displayed in its cult site in manuscript illumination.[54] See, for example, the important icon now in the British Museum depicting the veneration of the Virgin *Hodegetria* icon as a ceremony of the triumph of Orthodoxy.[55] It is important to note that in all of these images now extant, which were made to contain a copy of the original Virgin *Hodegetria* icon, even though most of them are made c. 1300 or later in the fourteenth century, they all show the Child Jesus in a golden garment and the Virgin in her purple/blue *maphorion* without chrysography, in a bust-length icon.

Even though as we have seen, the full-length enthroned Virgin and Child image of one type or other was more or less continuously found in monumental painting after 867 in the apses of certain Byzantine churches, it was apparently not until the thirteenth century that images with the Virgin and Child *Hodegetria* enthroned full-length become popular in mostly portable icons again, as they were found in pre-iconoclastic time, and then they were commissioned in the Near East for a variety of patrons in a variety of places. But there are only a few Byzantine images of this type that appear, mostly late in this period. Rather, it is mostly works apparently commissioned by western patrons and executed by "Crusader" or possibly by some Byzantine artists that survive in the greatest number. One conspicuous exception to this generalization is the great miraculous icon of the Virgin Kykkotissa from the Kykkos monastery on Cyprus, at least one version of which is extant as an early