

Article

An Investigation on a Coptic Embroidered Panel from the 13th Century “Crucifixion with the Twelve Apostles” (Benaki Museum, Athens)

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Abstract: The “Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles”, a unique Coptic embroidered panel, was on display at the Benaki Museum (Athens, Greece). The representation of the “Crucifixion” with Christ in the center and six Apostles on either side, standing next to each other in frontal poses, is quite a rare one. This rare iconographic image of the twelve Apostles could be linked to the Ascension or the Pentecost. This unique representation of the Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles, which also involves the Ascension, is a one-of-a-kind compositional formula representing Christ’s Death as a triumph over Death, emphasizing, along with the other factors, its non-Chalcedonic origin. Moreover, the interpretation of an inscription, written in at least three languages embroidered in black silk thread, is a matter which confuses the issue even more. In the present study, we will attempt a comprehensive investigation, a detailed description, and interpretation of this rare iconography, based on written and iconographic evidence traced in the history of art heritage objects.

Keywords: crucifixion; apostles; inscription; silk; embroidery; Greek; Coptic; monastery



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1. Introduction

This rare heritage collection piece, *The Crucifixion with the 12 Apostles*, a Coptic embroidered panel including a multilingual inscription, has been exposed in the Benaki Museum, Athens, until its refurbishment in 1989 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. “The Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles”. A rare and mysterious embroidered silk panel (283 cm × 48 cm) of the late Coptic monastic period 13th–14th cent., Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece.

The “Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles” (Figure 1), a unique embroidered panel (283 cm × 48 cm) of late Coptic art, was purchased in May 1929 by Anthony Benaki, the founder of the Museum, from Nahman, an antique dealer, for the price of 100 sterling pounds. It appears listed for the first time in the 1935 Catalogue of the Benaki Museum, with the simple description “The Crucifixion with the Twelve Apostles” (inv. ΓΕ7148). The description and dating initially was made by Otto Meinardus [1], who describes it as an embroidery of “the Crucifixion on silk with six Apostles on each side, one of whom slightly elevated”, as well as by the director of the Museum, late Prof. A. Delivorrias [2], with the only addition “Tentatively assigned to the 7th century”.

The theological interpretation of the death of Christ, since the early Christian period, has been articulated through the Crucifixion in works of minor art (manuscript illustration,

weaving, metalwork, engraving), such as the 5th century ivory relief from North Italy, the Crucifixion on the Monza ampulla (British Museum) (Figure 2). For the evolution of the iconography of the Crucifixion see [3,4].

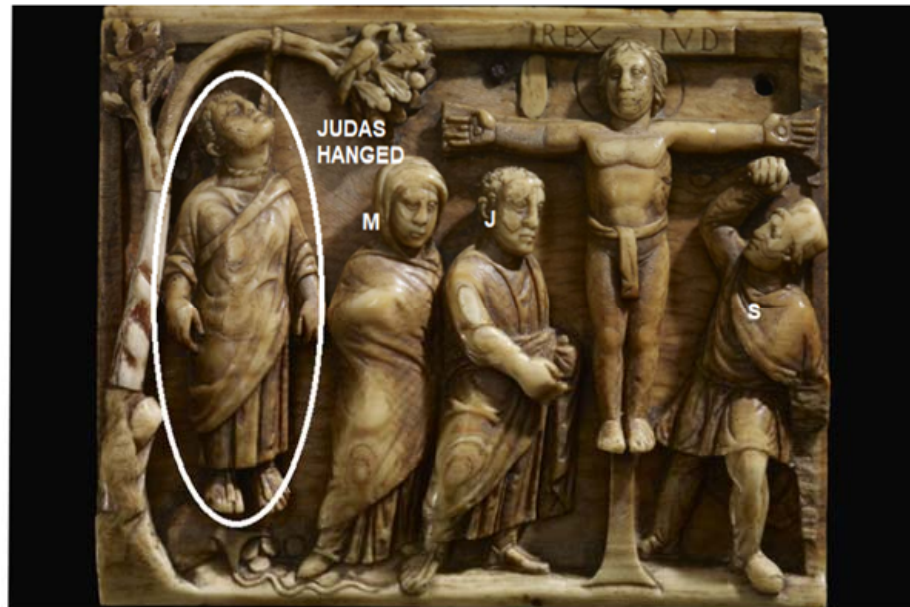


Figure 2. The Crucifixion on a 5th century ivory relief from North Italy, British Museum; Judas hanged, M for Mary, J for St. John and S for soldier ([4] and 16; based on https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1856-0623-5, BM No. 1856,0623.5).

It became an issue in the 9th century and later the Iconoclastic Controversy in the East, Syria, Armenia, Egypt, and the West, especially during the late Carolingian and Ottonian periods, in a great number of iconographic variations; in some instances, it might be accompanied by the Virgin, St. John, the thieves, or other figures associated with the Passion. The representation of the “Crucifixion” in question, with Christ in the center and six Apostles on either side, standing next to each other in frontal poses, is quite a rare one. On a Greek seal stone, 3rd c. AD, in the British Museum, the earliest similar type is found, yet this type, as attested by Gertrud Schiller, most likely comes from heretical circles [4] (Figure 321). A similar arrangement of the Apostles can be found in a scene of the Ascension, a fresco in the Baouit/Bawit Monastery V II [5] (p. 42), a deserted Monastery (known also as Monastery of St. Apollo, Deir Abu Abullu), lying in the Egyptian desert, facing the fertile plain, about fifteen kilometers from Dairut, north of Aysut (Assiut).

In the present research, note this unique heritage object, the Coptic embroidered panel, is revisited, and the intriguing issue of the position and artistic expression of the Apostles reassessed [1].

2. Technical Context

Initially, the fibers of the textile and those of the embroidered figures have been examined by microtomic section at the ITF (Institut Textile de France) Paris laboratories. The results were as follows: *Textile*: purplish brown and orange fibers, silk. *Embroidery*: Crucifix, Apostles: undyed white fibers, cotton. Inscription, crosses: black-dyed fibers, cotton (particularly good and well-preserved product).

2.1. Technique of the Textile

The crucifixion is a rare complete example of late Coptic monastic embroidery, despite the damage to parts of the textile (263 cm × 48 cm). The narrative scene is embroidered on a purplish-brown silk field in plain weave, which is decorated with three woven bands, perpendicular to the embroidery, (263 cm × 7.5 cm) of unspun orange silk threads in Samit

(2Z1). Under the iconographic scene on which an inscription is embroidered lengthwise, the third orange Samit band is cut in the middle. This verifies that the textile was much wider. An inlay-brocade pattern with the same orange unspun silk threads decorates the larger upper band of the embroidered panel. It comprises a repetition of geometric designs, such as the diaper scheme and a motif reminiscent of the candelabra tree ending to a smaller “head” upper element. This is an important motif of the Umayyad period, which was quickly adopted by the Coptic weavers of the time, and has persisted throughout the period of Mamluks [6] (pp. 10, 12, 53, 55, 145). (For more extensive information on Textiles, see [7] (Figure 8, p. 35–49)). Coincidentally, the salvage at the top of the embroidered scene (at the right side of the textile, on which the embroidery was made), has been preserved and shows, along with the weaving, the close fitted dents of a proper reed. This leads us to presume that the textile must have not been weaved before the late 12th–13th centuries, taking into consideration the technical evolution of the draw loom. Hence, we are dealing with a silk textile, which is expertly braided, but, nevertheless, associated with a draw loom mainstream production, which delimits us to date it between the 13th–14th centuries AD.

2.2. The Technique of Embroidery

A portion of the material is stitched with the scene that occupies the space between the orange bands in the self-couched and knotted stem stiches, which were not only characteristic of the late Coptic period but also used commonly in Medieval Eastern and Western Monasteries [5] (p. 646). The embroidered version of the “Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles” shows a primitive and inferior technique. Despite that, the effort of the embroiderer is obvious, which is the portrayal of various iconographical details. This can be seen on the garments of the Apostles, the details of which have been rendered only by means of using a different direction of the stitch. This is a consequence of the fact that the embroidery was mainly embroidered with white threads, except for some details which were rendered in red, brown, blue, salmon pink, and black (using cotton dyed threads). Some of these colors have faded with time. The textile at the places of the embroidered figures has shrunk and unsightly folds appear, which were created by the reaction of the cotton threads, possibly due to the fact that the embroidery remained in a humid environment for a long time. The oxidation has caused some decay in the wears and holes on part of the textile.

3. Stylistic Description and Discussion

The architectural layout of a Coptic Monastery church is formed by three chapels. The “Haikal” is the central one, forming essentially the sanctuary which contains the high altar and is usually closed by an embroidery curtain like the one we are examining. Usually, in the various Christian iconographic depictions of the crucifixion, the twelve Apostles are never presented all together since Judas had already died. If this occurs, in a rare case, then Matthew is selected as the 12th Apostle, in the place of Judas. From Chapter B of the Acts of the Apostles, it is derived that the depiction with the twelve Apostles is iconographically established with the Pentecost (see, Figure 1 and Figure 5 below). That is, when the number of the twelve Apostles is complete, and all of them together receive *The Holy Spirit*, they start preaching in the different languages. This is also mentioned in the *First Epistle* (6, 4) of Apostle Paul to the Corinthians.

The Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles (Figure 1), although rendered stylistically in a primitive and non-naturalistic way, with a total absence of any decorative elements, has, undoubtedly, a monumental nature. The Christ, nailed on the cross, occupies the center of the panel, dividing the scene in two symmetrical parts in an unusual compositional configuration. On either side stand six Apostles, one next to each other, in frontal poses, all of equal size except for the one far right, who is smaller. Only the Crucifix is larger; thus, the scene acquires importance and becomes centrobatic. Neither the Apostles nor the figure of Christ seem to be supported firmly on any pictorial ground. They all look rather suspended in the narrow space of the textile, in an endless arrangement; thus, it

is in accordance with the aesthetic expression of the two-dimensional surface, on which everything is suspended in a world that is transcendental and symbolic, so dear to the Copts. Christ has his eyes closed in death. In the East, the iconography of the dead Christ first appeared after the iconoclast controversy in 843 AD, as it did in the West (School of Reims) [see Radbertus in Paulus [8], (p. 9)].

A depiction which was first traced on an icon from Mount Sinai of the 8th century as presented by Weitzmann and Chatzidakis is nailed to a T-shape cross (*Crux Comissa patibulata*), or cross of St. Antony of Egypt (Figure 3). It is also used as the head of Pastoral staffs for the actual or symbolic support of ecclesiastics in the Orthodox and Coptic church [9] (p. 18). The cross is embroidered in purplish brown with some details in black, which evidently, although rendered in a naive way, play the role of the chiaroscuro around Christ's figure. His arms are outstretched and nailed; blood is also traced in salmon pink [10] (Figures 24–27) [11]. During the early Byzantine period, in the first representations of the Crucifixion on minor art objects, Christ appeared nailed to the cross with four nails: two for his hands and two for each of his legs, which lied frontally one next to the other nailed separately on the cross, like on a gold crucifixion “encolpion”. (See Dumbarton Oaks from early byzantine 6th to 7th centuries. Gold 8 cm × 5.30 cm, BZ1937.24.).



Figure 3. The crucifix stands in the middle of the scene, Christ's eyes closed in death, being nailed on a T-shaped cross (*Crux comissa patibulata*) with only three nails and wearing a loincloth (perizoma).

Both his legs, the right one on top of the left, are nailed to the upright of the cross with only one nail and are not supported on a suppedaneum. This type of Crucifixion with only three nails has its roots in the North, and it first appeared in the 12th century. This representation shows a new outlook on the Passion, Arma Christi [4] (p. 146) frequently appearing in many regions. Eventually, it travelled to the East with the Crusades, during the 12th–13th centuries [3] (p. 412).

Christ has a dark beard embroidered in black and lighter hair embroidered in brown. According to G. A. Sotiriou, these iconographic features are of a Jewish type [12] (p. 109). His body is portrayed frontally, rendered in a primitive style, with obvious disproportion, his legs being much shorter than his torso. His posture is heavy and stiff without any realistic leaning either to the right (Byzantine type) or to the left, *contraposto* (western type).

He is wearing a perizoma (loincloth), which replaced the *colobium* or sleeveless Chiton (Tunic) from the 9th century onwards (Figure 3).

An interesting scene with the Christ wearing a colobium at a later time [4] (p. 100) is found on a fresco from the Episcopi church in Eurytania (central Greece), middle 12th century in the Byzantine Museum in Athens. In either of the two lateral compositions flanking the Crucifix, the Apostles are shown as huge images. They all have bell-shaped (Figure 4) conventionally rendered bodies, a style which is properly Coptic. Such evidence is found in various iconographic sources, on works of minor arts, and on icons and frescoes, as have been presented in the articles and works of Maggy Rassart-Debergh, Piotr O. Scholz, P. P. du Bourguet, M.-H. Rutschowskaya, and L. A. Hunt, to mention only a few of the many experts. Some of the Apostles are wearing colobia and other chitons with a small cross on the breast and *himatia* (BIKOYKAION in Coptic, that is, the Byzantine Phelonion or the Catholic Chasuble). (For an extensive description of Coptic ecclesiastical vestments, see [13].



Figure 4. One of the three of the bell-shaped Apostles having their hands raised in a gesture of testimony. Each one is holding an orb with an inscribed red cross in their left hand.

It is noticed that their heads are larger in proportion to the rest of the bodies. Their eyes are rendered with just a black line; the same goes for the eyebrows and the nose, which is rendered in an oblong V shape. Their mouths are marked with only a small line or dot, either red or salmon pink. Their hair is embroidered in black, and only one Apostle has a brown embroidered hair line on top of the black one. Most likely the embroiderer meant to portray a figure of a fair complexion. It is worthwhile to note that none of the Apostles, in this case, is portrayed with white hair, i.e., of an elderly age. Usually in the Eastern iconographical prototypes, codices, Gospel illustrations, etc., the Apostles are represented throughout the Byzantine era with naturalistic features that follow specific iconographic rules, as presented in the most important work of the 17th century by Denys

de Fournia, representing an iconographic variety of ages. (For the Apostles representations see [14] (pp. 298–299)). At first sight, the Apostles all look alike, but one will soon notice that each one has its own particular features and, thus, personality. Two of the twelve look younger, with oval faces traced in black, three wear a beard, and the rest have fat, almost round faces with no apparent neck.

Their feet portrayed in the traditional Coptic style are bare. This is a custom still preserved in Coptic ritual, where the priest is barefooted through the liturgy, symbolizing God's command to Moses to approach barefooted (in Exodus 3, 5). The same is seen in many icons and fresco depictions of Saints, for instance, in the icon of St. Antony and St. Paul in the Coptic Museum, as well as in the icon and the fresco of St. Thomas the Hermit.

Despite the fact that the Apostles seem to be in a static state, their feet show movement—only five of them have been staying still. Three, on the right side of the Crucifix, seem to walk towards Christ. The same goes for one Apostle in the other lateral composition, who also walks towards Christ, only in the opposite direction.

The three Apostles who wear a beard (perhaps meant to be older and wiser), two on the left and one on the right side of the scene of Figure 1, have their right hands raised in a gesture of testimony. Each one is holding an orb with an inscribed red cross in their left hand. They are believed to represent the Apostles Peter, James, and John (*John XVII, 23*), who are rendered in this same pose to symbolize the transfiguration (St. Catherine, Sinai) and the Ascension (The Rabbula Gospels). (For an example see [15] (p. 164 Icon in the Benaki Museum. Ascension, 17th century) and [2] (p. 77). In addition Matthew is selected as the 12th Apostle, in the place of Judas. Thus, replacing Judas in a symbolic depiction reminiscent of Judas's death, hanged by the tree, therefore being elevated and not touching the ground [16] (Figure 5; see also hanged Judas far right in Figure 1).



Figure 5. Does this elevated figure represent Matthew (Chapter B of the Acts of the Apostles) rather than representing Judas?

In any case, we believe that this unique representation of the Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles, which also involves the Ascension, is not only an unusual and unique compositional formula but allows us to presume that it represents Christ's death as a triumph over death, emphasizing, along with the other factors, the non-Chalcedonic origin of the embroidered panel.

The scene of the Crucifixion is framed by a row of small, embroidered crosses on top, alternatively displayed in black and white. On the right and left, the two vertical sides have, respectively, twelve crosses in white. On top of the scene lengthwise, there is a row

of seventy crosses. We believe that the embroiderer has not embroidered the crosses merely by chance, but he or she must have chosen these respective numbers on purpose, trying to emphasize their symbolic meaning.

If we are on the right track, the twelve crosses on the vertical sides are referring to the twelve Apostles, the number twelve being the symbolic representation of the twelve tribes of Israel (*Matthew XVIII, 28* and *Luke VI, 13*).

As for the seventy crosses all along the top of the Crucifixion scene, they must represent the Seventy Apostles, disciples who were named by Christ himself during his lifetime to spread his Word all over the World (*Luke X, 1*).

On the other hand, little crosses which surround an icon or decorate a haical (central Coptic chapel with altar) door, a haical curtain, an iconostasis, or the ecclesiastical vestments on the ΠΙΒΑΛΛΙΝ, as found in the extensive works of A. J. Butler, Evelyn White, L. A. Hunt and others, are of typical Coptic style, used for the exorcism of Satan, as pointed out by Reverend Pola Amba Bishoi of the Coptic Church in Athens [17]. Some signs may have been added for ornamentation's sake.

4. The Inscription

Finally, it is the issue of the inscription, which is embroidered in black lengthwise, in one line, exactly under the scene. It is separated at intervals by a chrism embroidered also in black ✕ (Figure 6).

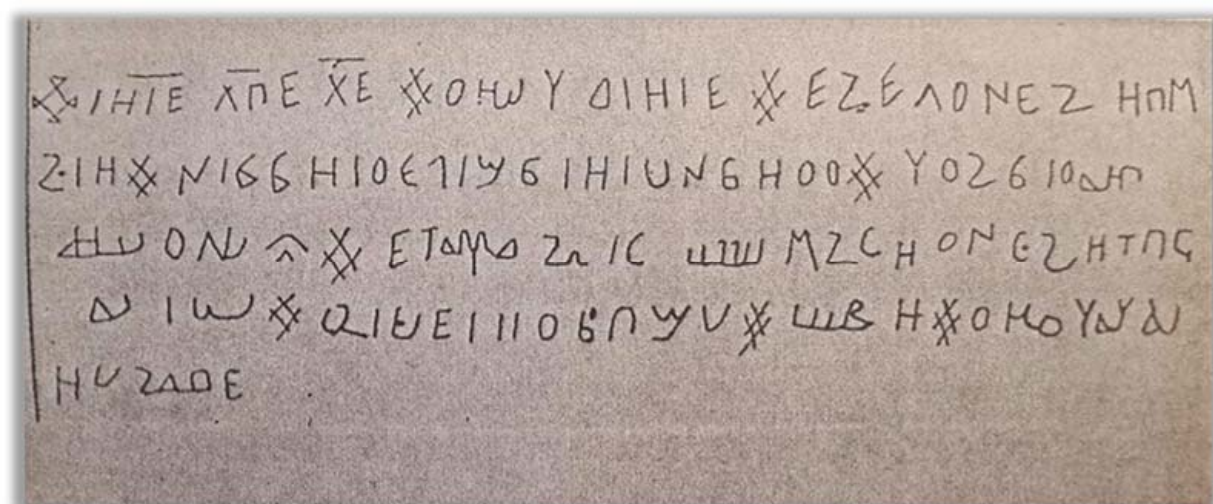


Figure 6. Unidentifiable inscription in Coptic, Greek, etc.; characters (Δοξαστικόν?) embroidered in black lengthwise, in one line, exactly under the scene, separated at intervals by a chrism.

The embroidered inscription is written in Greek and Coptic characters, while in some parts there is a variation of other letters, as is pointed out by Reverend Pola Amba Bishoi of being Syriac (Ⲭⲱⲟⲩ). Tentatively, I recognized a galgolic one (Q); some other

letters are unidentifiable (may be Arabic), such as this one (ⲘⲘⲘ). Nevertheless, the first three abbreviations at the beginning of the inscription give us a clue that they are of Greek meaning. The first abbreviation, although misspelled, is referring to the Monogram

of Christ IHIE. The second one, ⲠⲦⲉ, adding (E), could be read as (ΕΛΕΗΣΕ/have mercy), and the third (XE) with upper dash is deciphered with a great certitude as ΧΡΙΣΤΕ (Oh! Christ). On a 15th century unique icon of the Cretoitalian School, in the Byzantine Museum of Athens (T. 2638), is depicted a most rare representation of both the Crucifixion and the Resurrection in the East (Εἰς Ἀδου Κάθοδος = to the netherworld descent) and western prototypes. The icon underneath has a two-row inscription of a supplicatory

troparion and has been a donation. Thus, we are led to the conclusion that this inscription is a Δοξαστικον of either the holy Friday (ΔΟΞΑΣΤΙΚΟΝ of the Crucifixion; that is, the glorious type of hymn found in the Divine Services of the Eastern Orthodox Church) or a ΔΟΞΑΣΤΙΚΟΝ of the twelve Apostles (30th of June). A Coptic inscription with the same chrism, lozenge shaped at intervals, is also traced on a late Coptic tapestry fragment in the Louvre, that P. P. du Bourguet has described as a curtain or an altar hanging, from the Fayoum, 12th century [5] (p. 647). Some single signs remind us of Ge'ez writing, the script used as an alpha syllabary for several Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa. Its origin may have been an abjad (consonant-only alphabet) first used to write the Ge'ez language, which today is the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox. It is also a means of confirming dating [18]. The present textile object is unique, depicting Christian symbols, yet belongs to the wider investigation of Coptic embroideries. One of the biggest characteristics of Coptic textile motifs of the later period is dualistic expressions of Christianity and Islam, which were interpreted as virtue and evil, and civilized world and barbarous world [19], and, in some cases, use of bi- or multilingual aspects is observed [20].

5. Conclusions

The iconographic scene of the Crucifixion with the twelve Apostles in the Benaki Museum (Athens, Greece) is a most particular, mysterious, and unique representation of the Crucifixion. It is a hybrid with no resemblance to anything else. It has been proved iconographically that it has elements from both the East, the West, and the North. Stylistically in many details which are not apparent at first sight, one can trace Armenian connotations as, for instance, in the protuberant knot of Christ's loincloth (perizoma). In addition, one can notice a Syrian influence especially in the rendering of the Apostles' faces. The inscription in itself is a synthesis of letters from different alphabets. However, with its obvious syncretism, the particular personality of Coptic art prevails, with its abstract, conventional forms and its pronounced mysticism and symbolism, that, nonetheless, remains deeply Christian. As for its place of origin, our working hypothesis would assign it to the Low Egypt region of Fayoum. Having no iconographic or stylistic parallels of the Crucifixion here examined, it is practically impossible to gain any insight in its earlier history and in its origin, dated at the 13th–14th century.

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