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ALATA

Sky and Heaven: Angels' Location on Byzantine Images

Delphine Lauritzen

Thanks to a happy convergence of calendars, the fourth symposium held at the Russian Academy of Arts in Moscow on the Hierotopy of Elements, focused specifically on Air and Heavens, will take place during the time of the ALATA project, within the frame of a Marie-Curie European Fellowship implemented at Sorbonne University in Paris¹. The acronym ALATA, which stands for (*The Making of) Angels in Late Antiquity. Theology and Aesthetics*, means “that which is winged” in Latin. Wings symbolize the idea that Angels are located above us, in a space which is imagined between man and God.

When considering the notion of Hierotopy of Air and Heavens, one encounters the issue of the physical place of Angels. What defines these figures is their intermediary character. Angels are somehow divine, yet interact physically with men. They are equally able to touch on the most spiritual level – as they stand around God Himself – and to act on earthly concerns, even finding themselves attached to individuals whose custody is entrusted to them. The ground-breaking concept of Hierarchy was conceptualized at the beginning of the VIth c. CE by Dionysius the Areopagite, precisely to explain the place of Angels between Divine and Human. Hence the question: how are the various categories of angels organized throughout the different levels of air?

The Byzantines asked themselves: how is it possible to make the invisible visible, to make the immaterial material by the means of various techniques, like painting, mosaics, carving etc...? The core of the problem can be tackled by focusing on the very location assigned to Angels in art. Aesthetically, one can go one step further and propose that an efficient solution to imagine the sacred (*ieros*) character of Air in the perspective of *Hierotopy* is to depict the creatures that inhabit that space, *i.e.* the sacred *Hierarchies* of Angels.

In the present summary and at the symposium, we will first give a global presentation of the ALATA project before proceeding on to the specific, yet fundamental focus of Angels' location on Byzantine Images, creating an interaction with the concept of Hierotopy to shape our reflection on the subject. Only the extended version of that last development will be published in the Acts of the Symposium.

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I. Synopsis of the ALATA project

Angels were discussed and defined in the V-VIth c. CE in the regions of Egypt and Syria-Palestine, at the fringes of the Eastern Roman Empire. The originality of our project is to combine the theological with the aesthetical approach on the subject. We are (I). exploring how the construction of the idea of Christian Angels is the result of a complex elaboration involving many religious and philosophical currents (Paganism, Judaism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, different denominations of Christianity, pre-Islamic thoughts); how various parts of Late Antique society interact on the topic, ranging from theological speculation to the official religion of the Empire, including popular belief; how local cults and devotion to specific categories of Angels impact the development of the notion; (II). investigating the theme of Angels to characterize the Aesthetics of the time according to three axes of research:

A. The dynamics of Intermediary Beings

The theoretical background is the re-elaboration that the Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite (writing c. AD 500 in Syria-Palestine) operated on the system of Proclus (AD 412-485), converting into a Christian, Trinitarian perspective the three Triads of Neoplatonic 'Intermediaries'. Moreover, other textual sources written in different languages (Greek, Coptic, Syriac) and transmitted on various supports (manuscripts, papyri, other materials) will be explored.

B. Late Antique Personification

Developed in parallel with the evolution of the intellectual notion, the artistic representation of Angels raises numerous problems. For what concerns the iconography of the period, one can observe their new meaning through the transformation of the *Erotes* – the *putti* – and of other figures such as the Victories, the Seasons, and the Wings, from classical codes to different forms. The elements shared with Angels are wings and a special light around them, which reveal their divine nature. Personification is the working concept here, if one considers Angels as anthropomorphic representations of immaterial beings. Two types of documents need investigation: (i). Archaeological material bearing relevant iconographic evidence; (ii). Texts concerned with Art, either philosophical treatises on Aesthetics or *ekphraseis*, descriptions of works of art.

C. Icons of Angels

The cult of Angels connects Theology and Aesthetics, since they progressively come to be venerated as intercessors to God like the Virgin or the saints. The worship of Angels crystallizes on the notion of icon, as image making effective the presence of the divine. Our focus on the pre-iconoclastic period allows detecting early signals of the later 'crisis of the image' in relation to the depiction of Angels. Moreover, Monophysitism as a specific current of Christianity developed in the Eastern regions of the Empire played a key-role in geopolitics.

Our project is based on the construction of an efficient support: an electronic database of textual and of iconographic documents, which will be made available online in free access at the end of the project.

Two events dedicated to the project have been organized at Sorbonne University in Paris: (i) March 22nd, 2019, a one-day workshop (8 speakers, 30 attendants); (ii) March 19th, 20th, 21st, 2020, a three-day international conference on the following theme: “Inventer les anges de l’Antiquité à Byzance: conception, représentation, perception” (about 30 expected speakers), with Proceedings to be published.

Three presentations at international conferences, to be published in the Proceedings, are already given or planned: (i) October 15-19th, 2018, a poster presentation of the project at the XIV Congress of the Association Internationale pour l’Étude de la Mosaique Antique, Nicosia, Cyprus; (ii) April 12th, 2019, a communication on “*The Image of Angels in ps-Dionysius the Areopagite between Symbolism and Anthropomorphism*” at the I Colloquia Ceranea, Łódź, Poland; (iii) July 19th, 2019, a communication on “Parmenides’ Angels in VIth c. Syria” at the XII Symposium Platonicum, Paris, France.

Three peer-review articles and a monograph of research will be published or under review by the end of the project.

II. Sky and Heaven: Angels’ Location on Byzantine Images

When they are represented in a composition comprising several characters and/or settings, Angels always occupy a meaningful place. The context in which they are depicted defines the significance which is carried, perhaps even more precisely than the iconography itself. The theological premise is that Angels are divine, so their original sphere is Heaven, but that they act as intermediaries between God and men, and therefore they must be able to reach the lower part of air, *i.e.* the sky connected to earth. Air is consequently divided in at least two levels, one above the other, as the spiritual world overcoming the material one.

Such a hierarchy is easy to depict in visual terms, by distinguishing between the top and the bottom of the image. Important also is the orientation of Angels’ figures in that space: they can be immobile or moving up and down, and backwards, corresponding to the ideas of rise and fall. The location and position of Angels express a tension between, on one hand, their predominant connexion with God, and, on the other, their action in the world towards mankind.

We will consider a variety of examples from different contexts in order to establish a typology, of which three are presented here.

A. The Cosmic Image of the Winter baths, Gaza, VIth c.

John of Gaza, in a 732 verses-long *ekphrasis*², describes a work of art presumably located in the winter baths of the city of Gaza, at the beginning of the VI century. About sixty figures, mostly personifications of natural elements, represent the world allegorically. Among them are seven Angels. Contrary to what one might expect, they are not located in the upper, but in

² Lauritzen. D. Jean de Gaza. Description du Tableau cosmique. Paris [2015] 2018.

the lower levels of the composition. They are secondary figures, attached to the head personification of the group. Ocean and Sea gets one Angel each, and Earth, two. But that is the group of Storm, situated above the three previously mentioned, which catches our attention. Three Angels are found there; the first accompanies Storm himself, meanwhile the two others are beside Thunder and Lightning, two female personifications.

Such a composition asks the question of the relation between Angels and Cosmology. The Angels in the group of Storm are located in the lower level of air, the atmospheric sky, as is another group, that of the Winds. They are shown as they interfere with the earthly world, to help stabilizing the harmony of the universe. However, they do not reach the upper level of air, that is to say heaven, where the asters, and especially the Sun, are found, together with Aion. Besides, they are depicted as moderators of the natural elements' fury. One wonders if they can be interpreted as guardian angels and, if so, of whom, as mankind as such is absent of this cosmic image.

B. The Mosaic of Saint Catherine's church, Sinai, VIth c.

The apse wall of the Monastery of Mount Sinai's church is decorated with a spectacular golden-background mosaic³. Three levels can be distinguished: the apse itself shows the Transfiguration which took place on Mount Horeb. The Old Testament prophets Elijah and Moses are depicted on either side of Christ while the three apostles John, Peter and James are lying underneath. On the upper part of the wall above the apse, two panels represent the most significant episodes of Moses on Mount Sinai: on the left, he removes his sandals in front of the Burning Bush and, on the right, he receives the Tablets of the Law. Working as a transition between the two above mentioned registers, the lower part of the wall, whose inferior edge follows the curve of the apse's top, depicts two angels. They are symmetrically facing each other, on one side and the other of a central medallion figuring the Lamb on the Cross.

Our main line of interpretation concerns the location of the Angels on the intermediary level, which creates a link between the two main scenes, Moses' encounters with God as narrated in the Old Testament and the vision of Christ in a *mandorla* of light such as conceived in the New Testament. Moreover, another issue rises regarding the possible interpretation of both figures of Moses and Christ as Angels, that is to say, in their role of messengers between God and men. In that perspective, the main figures might not be the narrative characters of the Sacred writings, but the Angels themselves.

3. The icon of Climacus' *Ladder*, Sinai, XI-XIIth c.

One of the most famous icons kept in Sinai⁴ illustrates the spiritual treatise *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* composed by Saint John Climacus⁵. The difference is striking between the depiction of Angels on one hand, and Demons on the other. One notices at first glance that

³ Mango C. The mosaic of the Transfiguration at St Catherine's // www.fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2014/07/mango-sinai-mosaic, July 27th, 2014.

⁴ Nelson R., Collins K.M. (ed.). Holy Image, hallowed ground. Icons from Sinai. Los Angeles 2006 (Getty Museum), catalogue item n°48. Icon dated "end of twelfth century" in *op. cit.*

⁵ Text dated first half of seventh century, see Lauritzen D. Mount Sinai's Divine Ascent: a Hierotopy of Steps in Saint John Climacus // Lidov A. (ed.). Holy Mountains in the Hierotopy and Iconography of the Christian World. Moscow 2019, note 5.

they do not occupy the same level, nor are they spatially distributed in the same way. Angels form a compact group on the top left corner, as a horizontal counterbalance to Christ's figure in the upper part of air and as a diagonal one to the group of Holy men, who can be assumed to be Moses and the prophets, surrounded by the flames of the Burning Bush on the bottom right. On the contrary, Demons are scattered through the lower half of the air, attacking the monks and leading them to their doom. A clear hierarchy distinguishes the two. The golden background of the upper level underlines the holy space of Heaven, while Sinai's mountain range depicted at the bottom shows Demons operating in the sky of an earthly landscape.

First, we will investigate the interaction between the text and the image. By underlining which aspects of the text the icon painter selected and emphasized in the representation of Angels and Demons, we will search the scope of the visual rendering as theological interpretation. Second, we will distinguish the two separate developments which lead to the iconography of Angels, radically different from the one of Demons. And finally, we will consider other icons, manuscript illustrations, and paintings representing the same theme, in order to reveal the specificity of the Sinai one.