

The Theotokos of the Messina Missal as a Byzantine Icon in Norman Sicily: A Study on Patronage and Devotion

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Abstract : The aim of this paper is to study cross-cultural interactions between the West and Byzantium, in the fields of art and religion, by analyzing the decoration of one luxury manuscript. The Spanish National Library is home to one of the most extraordinary examples of illuminated manuscript production of Norman Sicily - the Messina Missal. Dating from the late twelfth century, this liturgical book was the result of the intense activity of artistic patronage of an Englishman, Richard Palmer. Appointed bishop of the Sicilian city in the second half of the century, Palmer set a painting workshop attached to his cathedral. The illuminated manuscripts produced there combine a clear Byzantine iconographic language with a myriad of elements imported from France, such as a large number of decorated initials. The most remarkable depiction contained in the Missal is that of the Theotokos (fol. 80r). Its appearance immediately recalls portative Byzantine icons of the Mother of God in South Italy and Byzantium and implies the intervention of an artist familiar with icon painting. The richness of this image is a clear proof of the prestige that Byzantine art enjoyed in the island after the Norman takeover. The production of the school of Messina under Richard Palmer could be considered a counterpart in the field of manuscript illumination of the court art of the Sicilian kings in Palermo and the impressive commissions for the cathedrals of Monreale and Cefalù. However, the ethnic composition of Palmer's workshop has never been analyzed and therefore, we intend to shed light on the permanent presence of Greek-speaking artists in Norman Messina. The east of the island was the last stronghold of the Greeks and soon after the Norman conquest, the previous exchanges between the cities of this territory and Byzantium restarted again, mainly by way of trade. Palmer was not a Norman statesman, but a churchman and his love for religion and culture prevailed over the wars and struggles for power of the Sicilian kingdom in the central Mediterranean. On the other hand, the representation of the Theotokos can prove that Eastern devotional approaches to images were still common in the east of the island more than a century after the collapse of Byzantine rule. Local Norman lords repeatedly founded churches devoted to Greek saints and medieval Greek-speaking authors were widely copied in Sicilian scriptoria. The Madrid Missal and its Theotokos are doubtless the product of Western initiative but in a land culturally dominated by Byzantium. Westerners, such as Palmer and his circle, could have been immersed in this Hellenophile culture and therefore, naturally predisposed to perform prayers and rituals, in both public and private contexts, linked to ideas and practices of Greek origin, such as the concept of icon.

Keywords : history of art, byzantine art, manuscripts, norman sicily, messina, patronage, devotion, iconography

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