

## An Icon of St George on Horseback Killing the Dragon by the Painter Angelos: A New Acquisition in the Benaki Museum

To the memory of Laskarina Bouras

The icon of St George (inv. no. 28129) was bought by the Benaki Museum in June 1986 thanks to a donation from the A.G. Leventis Foundation. Its dimensions are 41 x 37 cm and it depicts St George on horseback, in military dress, killing the dragon (Fig. 8.1). The saint's military dress consists of a cuirass, divided into three segments and decorated with gold striations, tightly fitting pantaloons and boots resembling bandages tied around his legs. A red cloak knotted at chest level is fluttering behind him as he rides. The saint is spearing a three-headed dragon with his lance. The dragon, painted in a greenish hue, has bright-red wings and a tail which is winding itself round the back legs of the saint's mount. The terrified horse is rearing up on its hind legs; it is painted in a greyish white with a red harness and the end of its thick tail is tied in a knot. In the lower part of the icon, the gold ground is covered by two pyramidal, rocky peaks. In the top right-hand corner, the hand of God has emerged from between two superposed quadrants and is giving a blessing. At bottom left, between the horse's tail and that of the dragon, is the signature *Χεῖρ Ἀγγέλου* [The Hand of Angelos], which is the standard signature of the well-known Cretan painter Angelos (Fig. 8.2). The signature seems genuine: the lettering and diacritics can be paralleled in many well-known icons by the same artist.<sup>1</sup> The hypothesis, first posited a few years ago, that the painter Angelos is to be identified with Angelos Akotantos, a Cretan artist living in Candia in the first half of the fifteenth century, has been accepted by most scholars in the field of Cretan painting.<sup>2</sup> Thus the painter Angelos is now believed to have been active in the first half of the fifteenth century and not the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, as used to be thought.<sup>3</sup> Consequently the icon of

<sup>1</sup> M. Chatzidakis, *Ἑλληνες ζωγράφοι μετά την Ἄλωση*, 147–54.

<sup>2</sup> Vassilaki-Mavrakaki, 'Ὁ ζωγράφος Ἀγγελοῦς', 290–98.

<sup>3</sup> Xyngopoulos, *Σχεδιάσμα*, 169–71. M. Chatzidakis, *Icons of Patmos*, 116–19.





Fig. 8.1. Athens, Benaki Museum. Painter Angelos, St George slaying the Dragon, icon (inv. no. 28129).

St George bearing the artist's signature must be dated to the first half of the fifteenth century.

Dating the Benaki Museum's icon to the first half of the fifteenth century is important because it gives us a base from which to explore other aspects of artistic production in Crete in that period. For example, thanks to the Benaki icon, we can, for the first time, examine the relationship between the painter Angelos and the iconography of the mounted, dragon-slaying military saint. In doing so, we can explore the process that produced this iconographic type, which, for all that it is related to them, differs from the mounted, dragon-slaying St Georges current at the time. This raises





Fig. 8.2. The signature of Angelos. Detail of Fig. 8.1.

the question of what Angelos' contribution was to the development and popularization of this iconographic type, which came to be immensely popular and to constitute a standard point of reference among painters from the mid fifteenth century right up to the eighteenth century. And of what, indeed, the contribution was of this particular icon to this process of popularization, and of whether, in fact, it played the role of prototype. The questions are, it seems, endless. However, within the restricted parameters of an article like this, rather than make any categorical assertions, I would prefer to make some suggestions, which can remain open to debate and revision as research continues both on this particular subject as well as on the more general one of artistic production in fifteenth-century Crete.

In a short paper he wrote on the Benaki Museum icon, published in the *Festschrift* for G. Mylonas,<sup>4</sup> Professor P. Vokotopoulos pointed out the connection between Angelos' composition and the depiction of St George on a polyptych in San Giacomo Maggiore in Bologna, which has been attributed to the painter Paolo Veneziano and dated to the mid fourteenth century (Fig. 8.3).<sup>5</sup> Laskarina Bouras had already remarked on this relationship in a brief presentation of the icon published in the magazine of the Friends of the Benaki Museum.<sup>6</sup> To be specific, the type of horse, the way in which it is rearing up in terror, the harness, the saddle and the knot in the tail are all identical in the two images.<sup>7</sup> More decisive still is the identical treatment of the dragon in the two depictions. For, rather than taking the form of a

<sup>4</sup> P.A. Vokotopoulos, 'Δύο εικόνες του ζωγράφου Αγγέλου', in *Φίλεια Έπη. Αφιέρωμα εις Γ.Ε. Μυλωνάν 2*, Library of the Athens Archaeological Society, no. 103 (Athens, 1987), 410–12, Pls 66α, γ, 69γ.

<sup>5</sup> M. Muraro, *Paolo da Venezia* (University Park, PA, and London, 1970), 101–2, Figs 96–7.

<sup>6</sup> L. Bouras, 'Εικόνα του Άγγελου με τον άγιο Γεώργιο καθαλλάρη, δωρεά του Ιδρύματος Α.Ε. Λεβέντη', *Οι φίλοι του Μουσείου Μπενάκη. Τα Νέα των Φίλων* (July–Sept. 1986), 26–7, Fig. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Vassilaki, 'A Cretan Icon of Saint George', 208–14, Figs 96–7.

Fig. 8.3. Bologna, San Giacomo Maggiore. Painter Paolo Veneziano, St George, panel from a polyptych.



serpent, which was standard in Byzantine iconography from at least the ninth century onwards,<sup>8</sup> the dragon in the Benaki Museum icon takes the form of a winged beast, as in the composition by Paolo Veneziano. Manolis Chatzidakis had some time before drawn attention to the relationship between this particular work by Paolo Veneziano and this type of horse – rearing up on its hind legs – as well as to the Western origin of this form of dragon, when writing about a Cretan icon (c.1480–1500; Fig. 8.10) sold at auction at Sotheby's, London, in 1981.<sup>9</sup> This observation was applied by other scholars in discussions of other icons depicting military saints on horseback.<sup>10</sup>

Though the cuirass worn by St George in the Benaki Museum icon may be reminiscent of the one the saint is shown wearing on the Bologna polyptych, it is even closer to the type worn there by the Archangel Michael – a representation in which St George's red cloak knotted over the chest also

<sup>8</sup> There are many examples and enumerating them one by one would not add anything to this paper. In any case most are mentioned in the well-known dictionaries of iconography. E. Lucchesi-Palli in *LChrI* 6 (Rome, Freiburg, Basle and Vienna, 1974), cols 369–71. A. Chatzinikolaou in *RbK* II (Stuttgart, 1963), cols 1057–9.

<sup>9</sup> M. Chatzidakis, 'Cretan Icons', in *Art at Auction. The Year at Sotheby's, 1981–82*, 201, Fig. 5.

<sup>10</sup> N. Chatzidakis, *Icons of the Cretan School*, no. 31.



appears.<sup>11</sup> In more general terms, though Angelos' work is permeated by a Late Byzantine character, he also adopts individual iconographic features which are found in fourteenth-century Italian painting and particularly in the work of Paolo Veneziano.<sup>12</sup> This process of borrowing elements from Western art and incorporating them into images of a Byzantine nature is entirely consistent with the artistic environment in Crete during the period of Venetian domination, the period in which the Benaki Museum's icon is thought to have been created.<sup>13</sup>

However, I think we are dealing with a rather more complex phenomenon, because the dragon in the form of a winged beast can be found in wall paintings in Cretan churches, some of which seem to be earlier than Angelos' icon. To be specific, this image is found in the painted decoration of St Isidore at Kakodiki in the district of Selino (1421), at St Nicholas in Prasses, Kydonia (first half of the fifteenth century, Fig. 8.4), and at St Panteleimon in Prodromi, Selino (late fourteenth / early fifteenth centuries, Fig. 8.5).<sup>14</sup> In these instances not only are the shape of the dragon (a winged beast) and the type of horse similar to those in Angelos' icon now in the Benaki Museum, but also the tack on the horse and the knot in its tail, too. Moreover, at St Isidore Kakodiki and St Panteleimon Prodromi the saint's red cloak, streaming out behind him, and the hand of God blessing are identical to those on the Angelos icon. These examples show that the iconographic type of the mounted, dragon-slaying St George cannot have entered Cretan painting through the composition on the icon by Angelos, because it already existed in monumental painting on the island. It does, however, seem that it was through Angelos that this iconography was introduced into icon-painting. At least that is what is implied by the fact that in the field of icons Angelos' composition is the earliest known to us.

But the creation of this composition through a process of combining elements from the Late Byzantine tradition and Italian art, and in particular the location of it in Venetian-occupied Crete, is rendered dubious by the fact that this iconographic type is also found in Georgia. To be precise, it is found in Georgian examples of metalwork and monumental painting from the fifteenth century (Figs 8.6–8.7).<sup>15</sup> It can also be found, with regard to the

<sup>11</sup> Muraro, *Paolo da Venezia*, Pl. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Some references to this can be found in Vassilaki, 'A Cretan Icon of Saint George', 211, nn. 24–8.

<sup>13</sup> M. Chatzidakis has given an excellent account of this process in: M. Chatzidakis, 'Les débuts', no. IV, 169–211; M. Chatzidakis, 'Essai sur l'école dite italo-grecque précédé d'une note sur les rapports de l'art vénitien avec l'art crétois jusqu'à 1500', in *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV II* (Florence, 1974), 69–124; M. Chatzidakis, 'La peinture', 675–90.

<sup>14</sup> *Byzantinisches Kreta*, 218, Pl. 168 (St Isidore, Kakodiki). S.N. Maderakis, 'Βυζαντινά Μνημεία του Νομού Χανίων: ο Άγιος Ισίδωρος στο Κακοδίκι Σελίνου', *Κρητική Εστία*, 4<sup>th</sup> series, 1 (1978), Pl. 48β. K.E. Lassithiotakis, 'Εκκλησίες της Δυτικής Κρήτης', *KretChron* 21, II (1969), 461–2, Figs 104–7 (St Nicholas, Prasses). Vassilaki, 'A Cretan Icon of Saint George', 213, Figs 30–32 (St Panteleimon in Prodromi, Selino).

<sup>15</sup> On the metal Tchekari cross, dated to the late 15<sup>th</sup> c., and on the tympanum over the main door on the west front of St George at Alaverdi, also from the 15<sup>th</sup> c., see



Fig. 8.4. Crete, Kydonia, church of St Nicholas at Prasses. St George, wall painting.





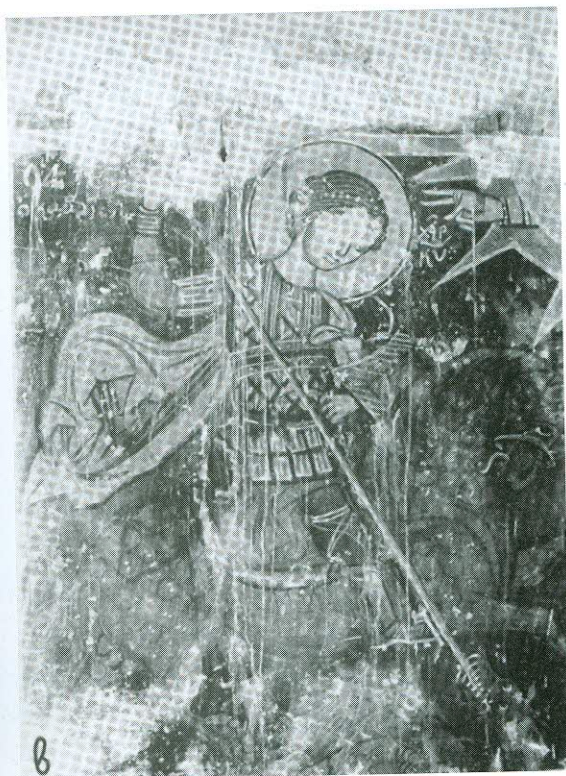


Fig. 8.5. Crete, Selino, church of St Panteleimon at Prodomi. St George, wall painting.



Fig. 8.6. Georgia, Tchekhari. St George, detail from a metal cross.



Fig. 8.7.  
Georgia, church  
of St George  
at Alaverdi.  
St George, wall  
painting.



type of dragon, St George's military equipment, the landscape background and the blessing hand of God, in an icon in London. The evidence of this icon is of particular importance because the date of 1441 has been preserved in its damaged dedicatory inscription (Fig. 8.8).<sup>16</sup> It gives us a firm dating indicator corresponding to the period when Angelos Akotantos was active. But what we do not know in this case is where the London icon was produced, though it was certainly neither Georgia nor Crete.

But let us return to the two compositions which undoubtedly come from Georgia. It is worth spending a little longer on these because they will allow us to formulate some suggestions about their relationship to the composition in the Benaki Museum's icon. It would, of course, be risky without any supporting evidence to suggest that the version of the iconography of St George on horseback killing the dragon reached Georgia via Crete. We have not a shred of evidence, whether direct or indirect, pointing to or even hinting at some sort of relationship or contact between these two border regions. Constantinople could have bridged the gap between Crete and Georgia, yet however seductive such a hypothesis might seem, it cannot be sustained. So what role might the capital have played in this process? Was this version of the iconography created in Constantinople or did it arrive there from Crete from where it went on to spread to far-

C. Amiranachvili, *L'art des ciseleurs géorgiens* (Paris, 1971), 152, 154, Fig. 9. I am grateful to Fr Christopher Walter for the information about the church at Alaverdi.

<sup>16</sup> Y. Petsopoulos, *East Christian Art*, exh. cat., Bernheimer Fine Arts (London, 1987), 60–61, no. 49. There is also a black-and-white illustration of this icon in R. Cormack, 'Icons in the Life of Byzantium', in G. Vikan, ed., *Icon. Four Essays* (Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD, 1988), 20, Fig. II.2.





Fig. 8.8.  
London, private  
collection AXIA.  
St George, icon.

away Georgia? Or was it perhaps first created in Georgia and then came to Crete via Constantinople? For the moment we cannot answer any of these questions, given that no examples of this iconography have been securely traced back to Constantinople. It is a pity that the evidence of the London icon, with its date of 1441, cannot for the moment be of any assistance. There is only one piece of evidence which might be of use. Angelos Akotantos, who is none other than Angelos, the painter of our icon, tells us in drawing up his will that he is not doing so on his deathbed or in extreme old age but in anticipation of a trip to Constantinople. The will was dated by M. Manoussakas to 1436, a date which has subsequently been confirmed by documents not available to him at the time which tell us that Akotantos died 14 years after drawing up his will, in 1450.<sup>17</sup> So, could this journey Akotantos made to Constantinople perhaps throw some light on the process whereby this variation of the mounted, dragon-slaying St George – which had developed in Crete under the conditions of artistic production known to have existed there – arrived in the capital and then spread to Georgia? Or did Angelos' trip to Constantinople bring him into contact with an iconographic type, which was well known in the capital, from where he took it to Crete? There are a number of pros and cons in relation to both

<sup>17</sup> Manoussakas, 'Η διαθήκη', 139–51. Vassilaki, 'A Cretan Icon of Saint George', 208, 210, n. 17. Vassilaki, 'Νεώτερα στοιχεία', 87–96.



these possibilities, so we must leave the question open for the time being for lack of firm evidence.

As I have already said, the surviving examples of the mounted, dragon-slaying St George show that the painter Angelos introduced and established this subject in Cretan icon-painting. It is well known that Angelos 'specialized' in military saints and that he also made popular the variant of the military dragon-slaying saint on foot, as seen in the icons of St Phanourios and St Theodore signed by him.<sup>18</sup> Both the popularity of St George and the recognized status and fame of the painter Angelos contributed to the process of popularizing this version of a mounted, dragon-slaying St George and making it a standard point of reference for subsequent generations of artists, Cretan or otherwise, who went on to copy it faithfully. The only respect in which late icons came to diverge from Angelos' composition was in relation to the dragon, which ceased to have three heads. This observation raises the following question. Might it be that Angelos had painted another icon of a mounted, dragon-slaying St George with a dragon that had only one head, and that was the version that prevailed? We know, after all, that Angelos was accustomed to repeating the same subject in a large number of his icons and that usually some of them would contain variations. It is probable that an icon of a mounted St George killing the dragon in the Old Museum of Zakynthos (inv. no. 751), which was destroyed in a fire in 1953 (Fig. 8.9), was connected with Angelos' workshop. The dragon in this icon has only one head. Unfortunately, the condition of the icon, as recorded in a photograph preserved in the Benaki Museum's Photographic Archive, is not such as to permit any detailed stylistic or iconographic analysis. Yet despite all these obstacles it is clear that there is a very close iconographic and stylistic relationship between the Zakynthos icon and the Benaki Museum icon, as well as with other compositions by Angelos.

The Benaki Museum icon signed by Angelos, a signature which dates it to the first half of the fifteenth century, offers a firm point of reference, which allows us to arrange the other examples we know of in chronological order with comparative accuracy. The number of these is striking, as, too, is the similarity of some later compositions to Angelos' icon – so that the use of pricked cartoons for the faithful reproduction of the original is very likely. We know that Angelos himself used working drawings, or at least the use of the words *teseniasmata* and *skiasmata* in his will has been interpreted as a reference to this.<sup>19</sup> We also know that some of Angelos' drawings were passed on, after his death, to his brother Ioannis, also a painter, and it may

<sup>18</sup> Vassilakes-Mavrakakes, 'Saint Phanourios', 223–38, Pl. 52, 57–8. M. Chatzidakis, *Icons of Patmos*, no. 69, 117–19, Pl. 27. N. Chatzidakis, *Icons of the Cretan School*, nos 6, 7, 8.

<sup>19</sup> '... καί τό παιδίν ὅπου θέλει γεννηθῆν, ἄν ἔναι ἀρσενικόν, θέλω, να μάθῃ πρῶτον // τά // γράμματα καί τότε τήν ζωγραφικήν τέχνην καί ἄν τήν μάθῃ, / ἀφήνω του τά τεσενιάσματά μου καί ὄλα τά πράγματα τῆς τέχνης, εἰ δέ καί οὐδέν τήν μάθῃ, τήν τέχνην λέγω, ἀφήνω τά τεσενιάσματά μου, / τουτέστιν τά σκιάσματα καί ὄλα τῆς τέχνης τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ μου τοῦ Ἰωάννου...' Manoussakas, 'Ἡ διαθήκη', 147.





Fig. 8.9.  
Zakynthos,  
Old Museum.  
St George, icon.





Fig. 8.10. Sold at Sotheby's, London, 1981. St George, icon.





Fig. 8.11.  
Minneapolis,  
private collection.  
St George, icon.



have been these same cartoons which Ioannis sold in 1477, when he himself was old and sick, to the well-known Candiote painter Andreas Ritzos.<sup>20</sup> I think that some of the later icons of St George on horseback killing the dragon, which copy Angelos' composition extremely faithfully, can be attributed to the workshop of Andreas Ritzos and his son Nikolaos. I would put the icon from the Hellenic Institute in Venice, the icon sold at auction by Sotheby's, London (Fig. 8.10) and one featuring two subjects (St George in the lower register with the Annunciation above) in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore (Fig. 8.12) in this category.<sup>21</sup> At no great distance from these icons in date is an icon signed by another Candiote artist, Angelos Bitzamanos (c.1467–1532), which is now in the Vatican Museum.<sup>22</sup> It is reasonable to assume that this icon belongs to the Cretan period in his artistic output, which lasted until 1518; for we know he left Crete for good in that year, moving first to Dalmatia and then to Italy. It is interesting to note how closely Bitzamanos sticks to Angelos' composition, despite the fact that his icon is of mediocre quality.

This faithfulness to the original model will continue to be noticeable in the icons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which are not exclusively the preserve of Cretan painters. From a very long list of such icons I will mention only a small sample, which will include two from Patmos, another which was once in a private collection in Minneapolis (Fig. 8.11), and various icons in the Archaeological Museum, Chania, the Antivouniotissa Museum, Kérkyra, and the Byzantine Museum in Nicosia, Cyprus.<sup>23</sup> In some of these icons, the basic iconographic scheme has had features added to it (such as the young George from Mytilene riding behind him on the horse's rump, or the Princess of Lassia and the castle) which weaken what is, I believe, the symbolic character of the composition (in which the triumph of good over evil is represented and evil is personified by the dragon), giving it instead a narrative character. It seems that the basic composition, which in the field of icons had been established by Angelos, had had these elements added to it very early on as a set of variations on the same theme. For example, the Princess of Lassia is included on the icon sold at auction at Sotheby's

<sup>20</sup> Cattapan, 'I pittori Andrea e Nicola Rizo', 262, no. 19.

<sup>21</sup> M. Chatzidakis,  *Icônes de Saint-Georges*, no. 100, 119, Pl. 58 (Venice icon). *Catalogue of Fine Icons*, Sotheby's, London, 7 December 1981, no. 29, 20–21, see n. 9 above (icon auctioned at Sotheby's). Vassilaki, 'Some Cretan Icons', 75–81, esp. 79–80, Fig. 1 (icon in the Walters Art Gallery).

<sup>22</sup> A. Muñoz, *I quadri bizantini della Pinacoteca Vaticana provenienti dalla biblioteca Vaticana* (Rome, 1928), Pl. XX.3. M. Chatzidakis, *Icons of Patmos*, 76, n. 6. Bianco-Fiorin, 'L'attività', 90–91, Figs 6–7. Gelao, 'Tra Creta', 36, Fig. on 34.

<sup>23</sup> M. Chatzidakis, *Icons of Patmos*, nos 23, 135, 75–6, 162, Pls 64, 92. The icon from the private collection in Minneapolis is unpublished. M. Borboudakis, *Εικόνες του νομού Χανίων*, Φιλολογικός Σύλλογος 'Ο Χρυσόστομος' (Athens, 1975), no. 32, 93–4, Fig. 32. P. Vokotopoulos in *Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art*, no. 131. D. and T. Talbot Rice, *Icons and their Dating: A Comprehensive Study of their Chronology and Provenance* (London, 1974), no. 83, 89, Fig. 83. Βυζαντινό Μουσείο (Nicosia, 1983), no. 124, Fig. on 40 (icon from Hagios Kassianos, Cyprus, dated to 1599).





Fig. 8.12.  
Baltimore,  
Walters Art  
Gallery. The  
Annunciation and  
St George, icon.

(Fig. 8.10), which I believe to be related to the Ritzos' workshop and thus dated to the second half of the fifteenth century, while on the icon from the Antivouniotissa Museum in Kérkyra we have the young boy from Mytilene riding behind him on the horse's rump. Whether or not it was Angelos who established these versions too, we do not know.

Icons like that in the Benaki Museum keep coming to augment and enlarge the catalogue of works by the painter Angelos, a catalogue which from day to day takes on ever more impressive dimensions both in terms of quantity and quality. This makes all the more compelling the need for a comprehensive study of this truly groundbreaking artist of the first half of the fifteenth century – Angelos Akotantos.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> This paper was in course of publication when Nano Chatzidakis published her article 'Κρητική εικόνα του αγίου Γεωργίου καβαλάρη σε παρέλαση. Από τη δωρεά Στεφάνου και Φραγκίσκου Βαλλιάνου στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη', *Τα Νέα των Φίλων του Μουσείου Μπενάκη* 4 (1989), 9–23. Although this article dealt with a different type of iconography of the mounted St George, that of the saint 'on parade' (in other words facing front and without the dragon), it is nevertheless an important contribution to the discussion of the iconographic variant featuring the equestrian, dragon-slaying St George, such as we find on 'our' icon in the Benaki Museum. And, of course, it is even more relevant to the debate around the artistic production of Venetian-occupied Crete in the 15<sup>th</sup> c.



# The Painter Angelos and Icon-Painting in Venetian Crete

Maria Vassilaki

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