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2025; June (15): 456:469.

Doi: 8.24394 /JAH.2025 MJAS-2505-1317

ISSN: 2735-430X (Print); ISSN: 2735-4318 (Online)

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## A Jerusalem-style Icon from Delta, Egypt

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### **To cite this article:**

*Alyaa Abdelbaky, Journal of Arts & Humanities.*

Vol. 15, 2025, pp.456 -469. Doi: 8.24394/ JAH.2025MJAS-2505-1317

**Received:** 05, 05, 2025; **Accepted:** 24, 06, 2025; **published:** June 2025

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### **Abstract**

The present paper deals with the documentation, conservation and treatment of an icon entitled "*Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*", which was painted by an unknown artist. The icon, which dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is of an unknown origin and was found in one of the old Delta churches.

While cleaning the icon from the church wax and grime that are due to the usual surrounding environment, it was noticed that the writings were in Greek letters with spelling mistakes. Moreover, the icon was in the Jerusalem style and this caused some debate about the origins of the icon, because initially the icon was considered Coptic in the church where it had been kept. Therefore, this paper focuses and discusses the probability of how the icon reached Egypt. Additionally, the usual conservation process of the icon through different steps such as cleaning, gap filling, retouching, and varnishing is documented here.

### **Keywords:**

Icon, Jerusalem-style, Coptic pilgrims, cypress wood, conservation.

### **Introduction:**

Of the early period of icon production, not much is known, especially the Jerusalem

icons, because of the widespread destruction of icons during the war waged over image-worship (Mosa, et al., 2024). Despite its

proliferation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is very little research about the history of icons painted in Jerusalem-style found in Egyptian churches, monasteries and private collections. Many of the icons came to Egypt mostly in the form of gifts and memorabilia from Jerusalem during Copts' visit or pilgrimage to the holy land.

There is also insufficient literature on the Copts' pilgrimage trips to the holy land, however in recent years there is a general interest in the history of Christian pilgrimage and the memorabilia that the pilgrims brought back to their homeland. In one reference on early modern pilgrimage culture it is noted that *"there is an observable antiquarianization of pilgrim practices in the sixteenth century: traditional tokens from the Holy Land such as palm fronds and water from the Jordan are joined by coins, artifacts from antiquity, and rare substances"* (Henny & Zur., 2022). A very good example of the aforementioned tokens are the two inlaid olive wood boxes, dating from the seventeenth century and containing rocks from the Holy Land, that are stored in the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen (Wangsgaard Jürgensen., 2022).

A Greek inscription on the back of an icon brought back home by a hajji from the Jerusalem pilgrimage, which is preserved in

Ružica Church in Kalemegdan, indicates that it dates back to the year 1819. Similar depictions are portrayed in the icon from the collection of Antonio Vasilev from Sofia, and the icon from the collection of the Hernen Castle in Holland, dating from the same period. Due to these common characteristics, the aforementioned three icons could be ascribed to the same icon painting workshop held by local Palestinian masters (Katić., 2020), who painted the icons in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for pilgrims. However, it seems that there were also non-Palestinian masters in Jerusalem, such as the Russian Vasily Filippovich Pashkin, whose icon-painting works were preserved at the Alexander Podvorie (Metochion) in Jerusalem (Mikhaylova., 2022).

In another interesting article the author considered that icons, apart from being a visual representation of the events described in the Holy Bible, served as a vehicle for expression of Orthodox ideology, including biblical cosmology, which is not limited only to the symbolic representation of the material and the sanctity of the sacred portraits and events. In some cases, the images are exhibited in a very literal way, turning the Orthodox icon into a "topographical map" that represents all details of a sacred story

together with the geographic area where it had taken place (Todorova., 2015).

Coptic art refers to the art produced by Egyptian Christians in late Roman, early Byzantine, early Arab and late Middle Ages. Icon is the word that describes a religious picture and is primarily associated with the paintings of the Orthodox Churches (Refaat et al., 2019; Helmi et al., 2023; Henin et al., 2022; Henin., 2023). Icons play a significant role in the spiritual life in churches, as they are interpreted within the theological concepts of the church. They are used as means of connection between prayers and the main portrait of the icon. Mostly icons portray the Father, Son, Trinity, Virgin Mary with Christ, saints and angels as visual reading or representation of the Holy Book. The existence of icons in churches is always connected with ritual practices like, lighting candles or venerating the icons (Henin et al., 2022; Al Khasawneh & El Serogy., 2019; Said et al., 2023).

The classification of Egyptian icons according to technique and support (wood, paper or canvas) is based on the practical experience of conservators in Egypt. Traditional local techniques and materials make the icons manufactured in Egypt, and

consequently the difficulties inherent in their conservation, more akin to ancient Egyptian, Graeco-Roman and Islamic wooden art works than to Greek, Italian or Russian icons. Therefore, it is sometimes interesting to compare the materials and techniques used for icons made in the Sinai Peninsula and those prepared and manufactured in the Nile Valley. These two important points have not been studied and compared to one another in relation to their common roots in Alexandria (Skalova & Gabra., 2003). Furthermore, many icons found in homes, private collections, churches and monasteries in Egypt may not belong to any of the aforementioned categories.

An icon found in a church in one of the Delta governorates was used as a case study for this research paper. The icon, previously classified as a Coptic icon, had been sent to the *Coptic Paintings Conservation Department of Monasteries and Churches in Haret Zuwaila in Cairo for treatment and conservation, which is documented in this paper*. However, while undergoing the routine conservation process, which included documentation, it was obvious that the style of the icon was not similar to Coptic icons found in churches. Therefore, the main aim, of this case study was to try to verify the origin of the icon and settle the debate

whether it was painted in Egypt or in Jerusalem.

### Methodology

Often icons were passed over from one generation to the other and are considered a family heritage. Their origin and artists are usually unknown; therefore, it is sometimes very difficult to date this religious heritage. Following a descriptive investigative approach, the icon under study is examined in detail and the artistic characteristics and the religious aspects are discussed.

Due to its condition, it was treated with minimal intervention, which is documented here, however, it is not the main objective of this article.

### The Icon under study

The Resurrection icon dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, drawn and colored by an unknown painter in the Jerusalem style originates from one of the old Delta churches in Egypt. It was possible to estimate the date of the icon, which does not bear a written date or the artist's signature, based on the icon's artistic characteristics (Lehnert & Landrock., 1998). The icon depicts the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, positioned centrally within a celestial cloud and surrounded by four angels. On the right side of the icon, four

myrrh-bearing women are depicted on a sand dune, while on the left side, the archangel Michael is portrayed seated on the coffin's lid to announce the event of the resurrection. In the lower part the empty sarcophagus surrounded by three guards in a state of fear and terror is depicted. The artist also added four groups of what seems to be four palm trees in a desert, with small scattered bushes the background (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Jerusalem-style icon and painted scene, Late 19<sup>th</sup> century, from Delta, Egypt (Before Conservation)

Similar to Greek icons the text is written in Greek letters with spelling mistakes. In the center it should read (ἡ ἀνάστασις τοῦ Χριστοῦ), which means “The Resurrection of Christ”, on the right side, the word (Μιχαήλ) that refers to “Michael” the angel, was abbreviated (MH), while on the left side

the word (ἡ Μαριάμ / ἡ Μαρία) refers to Mary (Figure 2).



Figure 2 The text in Greek letters with spelling mistakes.

## Results and discussion

The icon understudy “Coptic or Jerusalem-style”?

To answer this question it was important to look closely at several details, as follows:-

The clothes and artistic style of the icon under study were compared with a Coptic icon found in Deir Al-Naghamish in Sohag Governorate (Figure 3), while the clouds were compared with those depicted in another Coptic icon located in the Church of Marmina, Fom El Khalig, Sayyeda Zeinab area in Cairo (Figure 4).

It is very common to find similar icons in Palestine, but they were usually painted in more detail, because they were most probably prepared for installation in churches, on the contrary to the icon under study which may have been painted in "mass production" for pilgrims as souvenirs. With that purpose in mind the subject of the resurrection of Jesus Christ has always been a good souvenir from Jerusalem. By looking at the style of the icon, which represents the Jerusalem school of icon painting, it is clear that the painting may have been done quickly by a young emerging iconographer.

The writings on the icon are in Greek, on the contrary to Coptic icons, in which the writing is in either Coptic or Arabic languages (Atalla., 1998) (Figure 5).



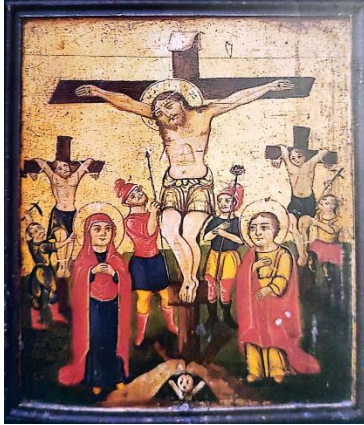


Figure 3. Coptic icon in Deir Al-Naghamish in Sohag Governorate

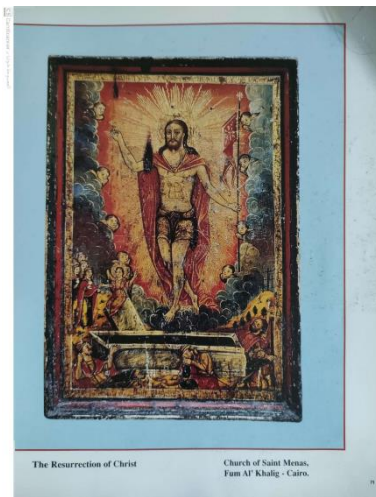


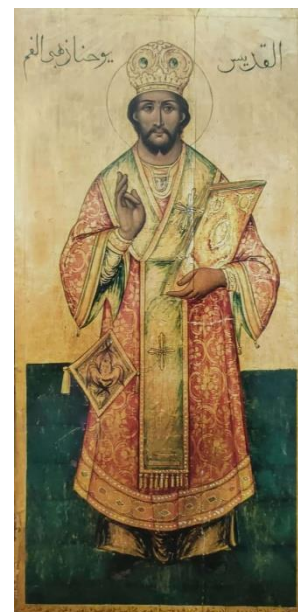
Figure .4. Coptic icon in the Church of Marmina, Fom El Khalig, Sayyeda Zeinab area in Cairo



A. Mari Tomah's Prophet Icon Abe Seven Church inside Deir Tomoh in Giza, which has several Jerusalem-style icons



B. Jerusalem-style Icon painted by an unknown painter, similar to the icon under study. Delta, Egypt



C. St. John's Golden Mouth Icon by the Jerusalem Painter Nicola - Maiden Monastery of the Virgin of Muharraq - Assiut

Figure 5. A, B, C. Examples of Jerusalem-style icons in Egypt

The aforementioned examples make it really difficult to determine whether the icon under study came as a token from Jerusalem with one of the pilgrims, or was actually painted in Egypt in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as an imitation of Jerusalem-style icons. Therefore, the next step was to study the structure, colours and wood support. However, the authors were not granted permission to undergo any examination and analysis to the different components of the icon, except for the wood fragments that were found due to an old insect infestation.

Many types of native wood in Egypt were used for making icons throughout the ages, such as *Ficus sycomorus*, *Acacia* sp., willow, carob, olive, and mulberry. Most probably other types of wood identified in icons such as teak, walnut, beech, box, cedar, cypress, and pine, especially pitch pine were usually chosen for making icons outside Egypt (Ali., 2023). It is not clear if the artists imported these types of wood into Egypt for making icons; but this is a point that may need further studies, and is beyond the scope of this article.

Nevertheless, by observing the anatomical structure of the wood type of the icon with and optical light microscope, and comparing the images with the anatomical characteristics the wood was identified as

cypress *Cupressus sempervirens* (Figure 6). This is not a native type of tree found in Egypt, which suggests that the wooden panel was not prepared in Egypt and confirms that the icon originates from Palestine or the adjacent area, where this tree grows.

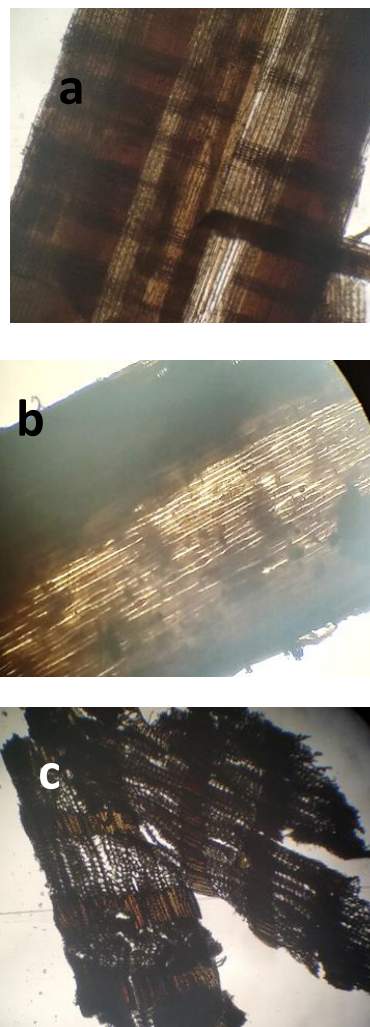


Figure 6. *Cupressus sempervirens* (a) Radial section, (b) tangential section, (c) cross section.

### Structure of the icon and state of preservation

- The icon was carried out on a wooden support in the Tempera technique and painted in the Jerusalem-style. It is composed of three layers: the wooden support, the ground layer, and the paint layer (Figure 7).
- Icon dimensions: maximum length (35cm), maximum width (26 cm), wood thickness about (2cm).
- Two small wooden crossbeams (23 cm long, 3 cm wide, 1.5 cm thick) were mounted horizontally in the reverse side of the icon from the back with bolts (Figure 8).
- The paint layer consists of several colours: red– yellow – green –blue – white, in addition to the gilding layer (Figure 9, 10)



Figure 7. The layered composition of icon understudy



Figure 8. Reverse side of the icon and the wooden crossbeams



Figure 9. The colours under the microscope



Figure 10. The gilding layer under the microscope

- The paint layer suffered from darkening (Figure 1), in addition to loss in the preparation layer and the paint layer (Figure 11), and some original colors



were overpainted in previous conservation attempts.

- Loss of the preparation layer, which is often due to varying temperatures and humidity.
- The presence of some holes and the loss of some wooden parts of the sides and corners, due to an insect infestation (Figure 12, 13).



Figure 11. Loss in the preparation layer and the paint layer



Figure 12. Missing parts of the panel due to an old insect infestation



Figure 13. Flight holes and the loss of some wooden parts in the horizontal crossbeams

### **Conservation and treatment**

The amply researched and tested methods for conservation and cleaning of polychrome wooden artifacts dating as far back as the Old Kingdom up till the Graeco-Roman period, appear to be eminently suitable for the treatment of Coptic icons painted on wooden panels. However, because icons are still in use, therefore each and every icon needs to be studied and treated individually. As a result, treatment materials are not the same as those chosen for museum objects. Additionally, the varnish layers of icons are commonly dealt with in the same manner as in the case of oil paintings.

### **Cleaning Methods**

Soft brushes were used to remove surface dust , while a scalpel was utilized to remove calcified dirt. Prior to commencing the chemical cleaning phase , a color sensitivity test was conducted to select the appropriate solvents for the specific case at hand. Based on these results, a mixture of a commercial organic solvent (Italian thinner) commonly used for varnish removal and ethylene glycol in a 3:1 ratio was used to remove surface dirt from the paint layer surface (Henin et al., 2022). This was done to conserve the original appearance of the paint layer and improve its overall condition.

### **Treatment of insect infestation**

Due to an old insect infestation application, 10 % of clove oil mixed in ethyl alcohol was applied with a syringe on the bore holes found in the icon.

### **Gap-Filling**

- The gaps and missing parts in the wooden support of the icon were compensated with a mixture of fine sawdust and polyvinyl acetate adhesive, and the filler was adjusted so as to be on the same level as the wooden support (Henin et al., 2022) (Figure 14).

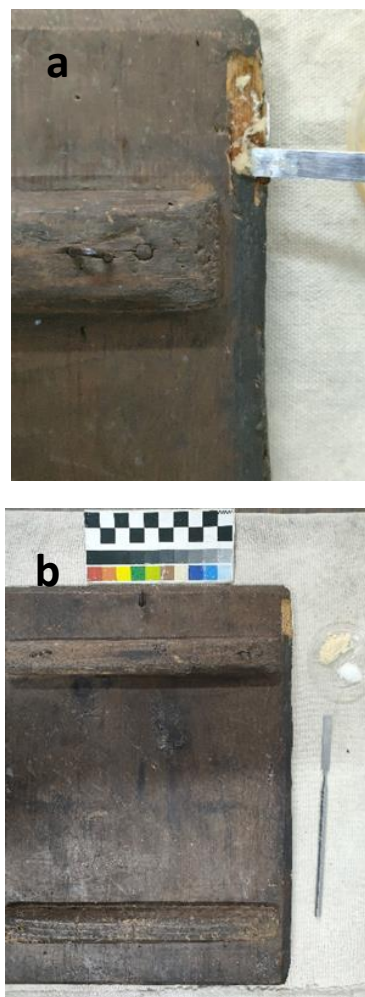


Figure 14. (a), (b) The gap filling process

Missing areas of the preparation layer were treated according to literature and previous works in the field of icon conservation (Henin et al., 2022, Henin et al., 2023). The wood surface surrounding the missing parts was thoroughly cleaned, then the paste / putty (Italian gesso composed of calcium carbonate paste mixed with gelatin glue 8%) was placed and flattened, and the outer surface was colored to match the original colour and left for 24 hours to dry (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Gap-filling using Italian gesso paste

### **Retouching**

The missing color parts were then completed using colors and pigments matching the original layer (Henin et al., 2023) (Retouching process) (Figure 16).



Figure 16. The Retouching processes using the *Tratteggio* technique

### **Varnishing**

Finally, the paint layer was re-varnished with a protective layer of dammar varnish with turpentine oil in a 2:1 ratio. The icon was then left to dry at room temperature (Henin et al.,2023) (Figure 17).



Figure 17. The Icon after conservation



## **Conclusion**

Conservation sciences contribute significantly to the preservation of cultural and religious heritage, both in Egypt and worldwide. During the treatment of any artifact a conservator can help curators in the artistic analysis of the studied object. This research has highlighted a wealth of new information that will benefit scientific research and scholars in the field of icon conservation in particular the Jerusalem-style icons found in Egypt.

This research has revealed that icons found in Egyptian churches still hold many secrets, both in their execution techniques, their origins, artists and the rich thematic content they carry, making them a fertile ground for researchers in the field of Christian and Coptic heritage. There are many unanswered questions on what Coptic Christians brought back with them from their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the presents that they may have given to close friends and relatives.

The investigation and analysis of the different components of icons found in Egypt are one of the very important points that need to be considered in future research, to settle current artistic issues. For example, there is an assumption that some icons were colored in Egypt, and that is why it was classified

right from the beginning of the conservation procedures that it was a Coptic icon. However, after identifying the wood, which turned out to have been taken from a non-native Egyptian tree, this such an assumption had to be changed. It is not clear whether or not the Christian artists had the opportunity to export wood for their icons, as their predecessors, but in the case of the icon under study, with its Greek letters there is a high probability that icon was not painted in Egypt.

This study on a small icon, which landed in the hands of the authors for conservation purposes could be considered a preliminary step towards future studies on the classification, provenance and manufacture of icons found in Egypt.

## **Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to thank Professor Faten Nastas Mitwasi, Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture, Bethlehem, Palestine and Dr. Georgios Tavlaridis for their valuable opinion on the probable origin and painting style of the icon under study.

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