

BYZANTINE PAINTINGS AT ESKİ GÜMÜŞ

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So far as is now known, the rock-cut church at Eski Gümüş was first reported by the late Professor Remzi Oguz Arık in 1940. Later, in 1961, Bay Ahmet Akif Tüntenk, history master at the Nigde Lisesi, told me of it at the Sixth Congress of the Turkish Historical Society. Later that year, my wife and I carried out a preliminary survey of the church and paintings that Akif Bey had described. What we saw convinced us that the paintings were outstanding in quality, and on my return to Ankara I applied for permission to study them further in 1962. In November of that year, accompanied by Mr David Winfield, we spent several days the site. During that time, several important paintings were partially cleaned, and a preliminary survey made of the church.

The entrance is dramatic, through a tunnel cut over 7 metres in the rock. This tunnel leads into a large, almost square courtyard, with its sides an average of 13.5 metres. The height of its walls is the same, so that the effect is that of a cubic light-well with the church entered through the northern facade. This facade is carved with a blind arcade of very slender arches which spring from small capital-like members with volutes incised with curious and most unusual decoration.

The church, again carved from the rock, is approached from the west - of approximately so - through an *exo-narthex* and *narthex*. While there is little of note in the *exo-narthex*, the *narthex* is a rectangular barrel-vaulted room, with the

vault defined by a flat moulding, decorated with a painted pattern in red and black. This moulding runs straight along the sides, and then follows the curve of the vault at either end. There is also a continuous blind arcade, broken only at the openings from the courtyard and *exonarthex* and into the church proper. On the northern side are four niches, with three on either side of the two interior doors. To the south of the door into the church the two slender pillars which originally divided the niches were cut away, and the whole area smoothed away to take a wall painting. This painting, now in a relatively poor state of preservation, depicts a seated Virgin with Child, flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel to the right and left of the spectator respectively.

The rock-cut church has a small central dome. Its four huge columns rise from octagonal plinths, while at the top a flat fillet surmounted by a square abacus does duty as a capital. These columns are covered with a thick rendering of plaster, attractively decorated with long petalled rosettes in red and green.

The first feature to catch the eye is an arched opening leading at ground level to a sarcophagus and, beyond, to another tomb at a higher level. This opening is shaped like a keyhole, since the sides slope inwards and the arch is a pronounced horseshoe. In the soffit of the arch, on either side of a red central cross, are the full length figures of St Stephen and St

John the Baptist. Spethen is a youthful figure in a black cassock and alb. In his right hand he holds a thurible with red embers glowing in the bowl; in his left he grasps a jewel studded icon. St John, on the other hand, is a gaunt figure, with dark ringlets falling down to his shoulders.

One of the finest paintings in the church is undoubtedly the scene of the Annunciation which spans niche just described, with Gabriel to the west of it and the Virgin to the east. The archangel stands, leaning forward, his right hand raised in salutation. For her part, the Virgin is seated on a throne, her head slightly inclined.

Gabriel's head (Fig. 1) which fortunately is complete - is of extreme beauty. Framed in a bright yellow halo and shown in three-quarter view, the face is outlined in dark brown with completely confident brush-strokes. His chestnut hair is arranged at the front in curls, but falls in ringlets over the nape of the neck. Particularly delicate and fine are the lines of chin, cheek and throat, as also the treatment of the eyelids. While the effect is, at first, of sweetness - even of femininity - a second scrutiny reveals the strength and authority of the supernatural messenger. The technique used for the Virgin the same, but despite the richness of her pearl-studded drapery, submission and humility are suggested by the downward inclination of the head, emphasising her position at a lower level than Gabriel's.

In 1962, while cleaning the upper part of the Annunciations scene, we were able to see through the accumulated grime of centuries, a higher panel containing a representation of the Nativity. None of the details were, however, visible. In 1963, however, this scene was partially cleaned, to reveal a masterpiece of Byzantine art. In the centre is the Virgin, reclining, with

the infant Christ at her side. To the right below are two women, Mea and Salome washing the Child, while to left St Joseph sits in thought. Above are angels of the heavenly host announcing the glad tidings to the shepherds, while the three kings from the East approach from the left, bringing gifts to the Christ Child.

In 1962, in the lunette, we had seen another picture which we could not interpret in its then very dirty state. After cleaning, however, it was quite clear as the scene of the presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem. In the centre are the Virgin and Child, to the left the prophetess Anna and St Joseph holding two young pigeons, the customary offering at the temple. To the right is the old St Simeon. This picture, like the Nativity, is very finely preserved, and the faces are barely damaged.

These three pictures, the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Presentation are perhaps the finest examples of Middle Byzantine art (c 1050 - 1100) ever discovered in Central Anatolia. There is no doubt that in style and preservation they are superior to examples at Göreme, where the closest parallel is, perhaps, the painting in the church of Meryem Anne.

As for the rest of the church at Eski Gümüş, the nave extends eastwards in an apse of horseshoe plan in both plan and elevation. This apse is flanked to either side by a niche, well over 2.00 metres high, the southern filled with the figure of St John the Baptist in the attitude of prayer, the northern with a painting of the Virgin and Child. The upper part of this northern niche is painted in the dark, smoky blue used as a background to all the figures in the church. The lower part is white. Against this the Virgin is depicted standing to full height, holding the Infant Jesus on her left arm, her right held diagonally across her breast. This is nor-

mal, but there are points of unorthodoxy which make the picture worthy of further study. The first is the elongation of the Virgin, specially from waist to feet, and the consequent smallness of the head in proportion to the total height. The second is the swarthy flesh tint and thin black eyebrows. Lastly there is the unmistakable intention of the painter to introduce a note of sympathetic understanding of the mother for her child. To this end, the Virgin's head is inclined in the smallest degree towards the Infant, while the lines of the nose and mouth - strongly emphasized in other figures at Eski Gümüş - are softened to produce an expression of tenderness. This group is rather unusual, and painted by an artist with a very distinctive style.

In the apse are three separate registers of paintings. In the lowest are full length figures, all of them - with the exception of St George - (Fig. 2) Doctors of the Church, (Fig. 3, 4, 5) ranged five on either side of a Virgin *orans*. Above these are busts of the Apostles and Evangelists, of which four are headless and without identificatory inscriptions. In the conch, the centre is occupied by a magnificent painting of Christ, but all the paintings to the right of Him have been obliterated, with the exception of St John the Baptist who stands nearest to the nave. On the left, looking outward, are the symbols of St Matthew and St Luke, the archangel Michael and the Virgin. The missing figures on the other side, therefore, are the archangel Gabriel and the symbols of St Mark and St John.

The doctors of the Church are all represented as elderly bearded men, all of them grey except for St Basil, whose hair and beard are brown. Within the strict frontality of the figures, there is

diversity in the individual treatment of features, the varied coloring and patterns of the drapery and also in the position of the hands (Fig. 6) which are in fact very well observed. There is also a rhythm, easily recognizable, in the way that right hands are alternately raised in blessing or grasping a codex held in the left.

Less austere and even better preserved are the Apostles and Evangelists in the upper register. The heads of SS James, John and the (Fig. 7) are fine by any standard and the head of St Peter is full of character. The busts are not this time frontal, all of them inclining inwards very slightly towards the centre (Fig. 8).

The paintings in the apse have now had their preliminary cleaning, and the state of preservation is excellent indeed.

Progress in the church may be summarized as follows.

(a) In the apse, all holes have now been filled in, and only require toning in. The figures of the Virgin, St Michael, and the symbols of St Matthew and St Mark have already been toned in.

(b) In the north and south niches the figures of the Virgin have been repaired, but still require toning in.

(c) In the *narthex* the group has been repaired, but still requires toning in.

(d) On the north wall, the Presentation scene has been repaired but requires further cleaning and toning in. The Nativity scene has been partially cleaned, but still requires repair and toning in. The Annunciation has been partially repaired, but still needs toning in.

(e) The columns have been partially cleaned and repaired.



Fig. 1 — Head of Gabriel.

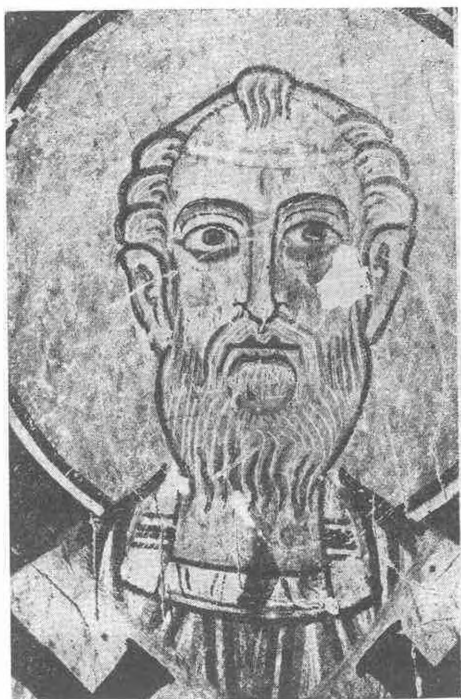


Fig. 2 — Head of St. George.

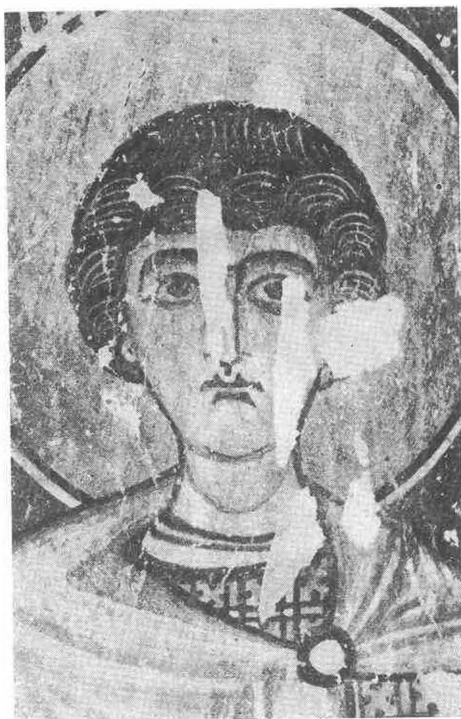


Fig. 3 — St. Gregory of Nazianzus.

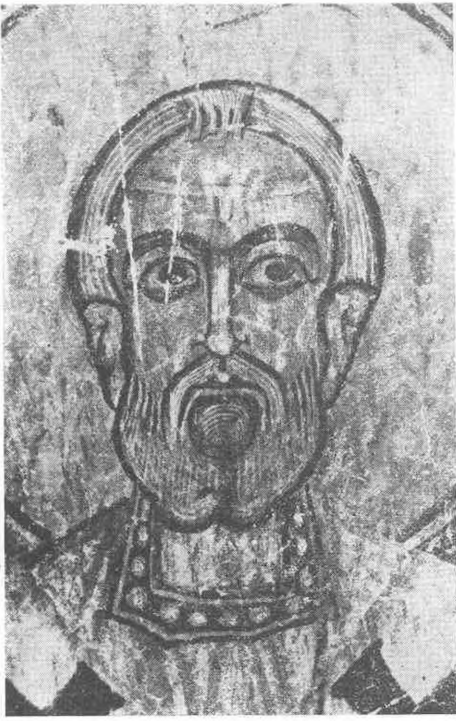


Fig. 4 — St. Nicholas.

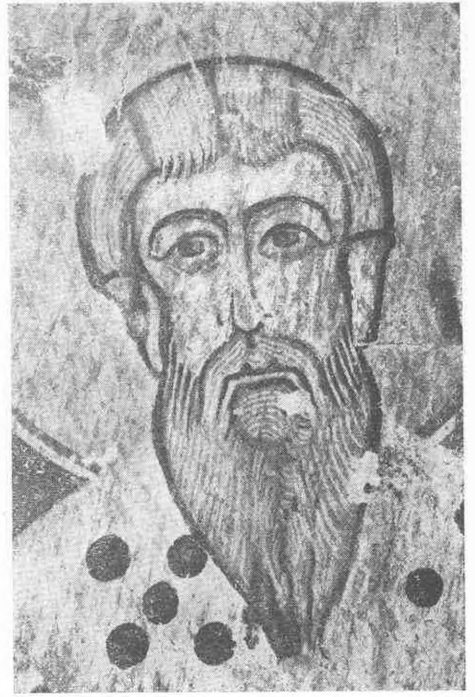


Fig. 5 — St. Athenogenes.



Fig. 6 — Detail of an apostle's hand.



Fig. 7 — Busts of St. James, St. John and St. Luke.

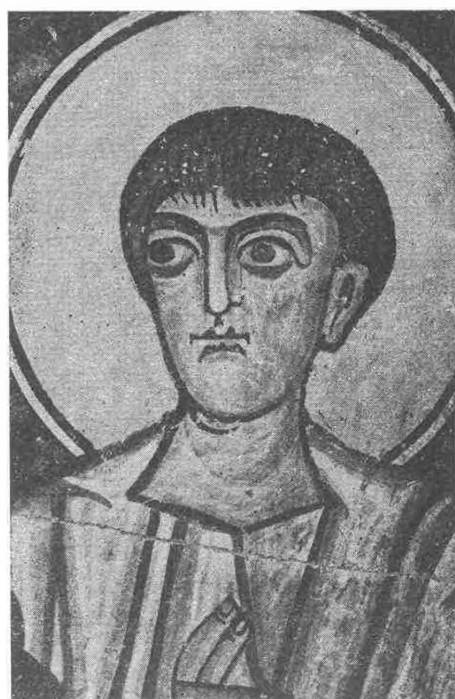


Fig. 8 — Head of St. Thomas.