

SŁAWOMIR SKRZYNIARZ

THEODORE ANAGNOSTES' ACCOUNT OF A BLASPHEMOUS
PAINTER. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN EARLY BYZANTINE
ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMAGES OF CHRIST

The image of the bearded and long-haired Christ was, finally acknowledged to be true to the prototype and, in consequence, became canonical for Byzantine art following the extinction of iconoclasm (843) – thus rather late, almost five hundred years after its appearance.¹ Without going into the details of a complex and long-lasting process by which this view had been hammered out,² it is enough to mention that the whole matter was caused by the invention of the so-called images ‘not made by [human] hands’ (ἄχειροπο...ῆτοι), i.e. the portraits of Christ, naturally with a beard and long hair, which were found in miraculous circumstances (the icon of Camuliana) or created as an imprint of His face (Mandylion). The oldest extant references to the existence and public cult of this kind of relics go back to the second half of the 6th century.³ It was also then that the iconographic formula discussed here, which had earlier been almost unique to the art of the Latin West, was beginning to spread in Byzantium.⁴

This turning point in the history of Byzantine iconography of the God Incarnate is all the more conspicuous because before the second half of the 6th century images of the bearded and long-haired Christ had been painted or sculpted in Byzantium only sporadically and, in addition, openly, sometimes sharply criticized there. The criticism was in large measure based on the conviction, shared by all Early Christian writers, that there existed no reliable knowledge of what Christ really looked like.⁵ However, while in the West this did not entail the negation of such or other images of Him – St Augustine even

¹ The beginnings of representing Christ with a beard and long hair are discussed among others by Sauer 1924; Wessel 1963: 973–981; Kollwitz 1968: 359–363; Hinz 1973: 68–83; Skubiszewski 1994.

² This question has recently been analyzed in detail by Büchsel 2003.

³ See Dobschütz 1899; Büchsel 2003: 60–67.

⁴ Cf. Wessel 1963: 973–976.

⁵ Cf. Sauer 1924: 303–305; Leclercq 1927: 2400–2403; Wessel 1963: 966–967; Hinz 1973: 25–38 (Chapter 2: *Wie hat Jesus ausgesehen*); Jensen 2005: 134–139. Related texts are collected by Dobschütz 1899: 105*–107* (Belege zu Kapitel II).

seems to have had some sympathy for experiments in this respect⁶ – the writers and thinkers of the Greek East castigated both the Christians wishing to have images of the Saviour and the artists who painted them.⁷ The former were warned by Eusebius of Caesarea against introducing “the pagan custom” (ἡ ἑθνητικὴ συνήθεια) into Christianity,⁸ while Epiphanius of Salamis discredited the efforts made by the latter.⁹

Apart from referring to the lack of knowledge of Christ’s features, Epiphanius pointed out gross logical inconsistencies in the artists’ works. One of them was the habit of representing the long-haired Christ surrounded by the cropped or balding apostles. In the Cypriot bishop’s opinion the painters doing this “according to their whim” (κατὰ τὴν αἰσχρονομίαν αὐτῶν), stood in contradiction to the message of the Gospels. “If then – writes Epiphanius – the Saviour had long hair while His disciples were cropped, and so, by not being cropped, He was unlike them in appearance, for what reason did the Pharisees and scribes give a fee of thirty silver pieces to Judas that he might kiss Him and show them that He was the one they sought, when they might themselves or through others have known by the token of His hair Him whom they were seeking to find, and this without paying a fee?”¹⁰

Even if Epiphanius saw and criticized only images of the youthful Christ (with long hair but without a beard), his remarks might equally well apply to those of the mature type (with a beard and long hair) which became widespread in the West, especially in Rome, in Epiphanius’ lifetime.¹¹ In any case his remarks are a good point of reference for analysis of the direct criticism of the “Roman” formula, undertaken in the early 6th century by Theodore Anagnostes, a representative of the contemporary intellectual elite of Constantinople. It is worth adding that it was then that this formula was beginning to spread to the capital of the Eastern Empire.¹²

In the *Ecclesiastical History*, finished about 520, whose content is known to us thanks to abridged copies, paraphrases, and quotations from the lost original edition,¹³ Theodore included a short story about an event which was said to have taken place in Constantinople several dozen years before. The 7th century *Epitome* of the above-mentioned work states that at the time of the Patriarch Gennadius (458–471) “[...] ἡ χεὶρ τοῦ ζωγράφου τῆς ἁγίας τοῦ θεοῦ σωτῆρα γρηγορίου ἐπέπεσε ἐπὶ τὸν ζωγράφον ὅτι ἐτόλμησε ζωγραφεῖν τὸν κύριον ἰσχυρῶς ὡς ἄνθρωπον” ([...] was withered the hand of a painter who dared to

⁶ In *De Trinitate* I.viii.4,7 St Augustine considers the fact that “ipsius Domini facies carnis innumerabilium cogitationum diuersitate uariatur et fingitur” as the effect of the natural inclination of the “natura humana” for creating an image of God. Latin text in Dobschütz 1899: 106* (Belege zu Kapitel II).

⁷ Such a critical approach is characteristic of the writers between the 4th and 6th centuries, who definitely objected to any images. The texts concerning this question have recently been collected and provided with penetrating commentaries by Thümmel 1992. Cf. Grabar 1957: 27–66; Avenarius 2005: 22–23; 29–36.

⁸ Florovsky 1950; Thümmel 1992: 47–53.

⁹ Maraval 1987; Thümmel 1992: 65–73.

¹⁰ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Letter to the Emperor Theodosius*. Greek text in Thümmel 1992: 301; English translation: Mango 1986: 42.

¹¹ Sauer 1924: 303–305; Leclercq 1927: 2400–2403 Wessel 1963: 966–967.

¹² Cf. Wessel 1963: 973–975.

¹³ See G.Ch. Hansen’s Introduction to *Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte*, especially pp. ix–xi (date) and xix–xxxv (textual basis for reconstruction).

paint the Saviour in the likeness of Zeus. Gennadius healed him by means of a prayer).¹⁴ According to the passage in the *Third Oration on Images* by John Damascene, which was most probably a direct quotation from the *Ecclesiastical History*, “TMl̄šgeto æj Øp̄Ō “Ellenòj tinoj tō ærgon TMpitage^j tÁj e,,k̄Ōnoj” (it was said that the commission of making the image was given [to him] by some pagans). The depiction of Christ in the likeness of Zeus was to induce Christians to the unconscious worship of the pagan god.¹⁵ Let these details suffice for a while.

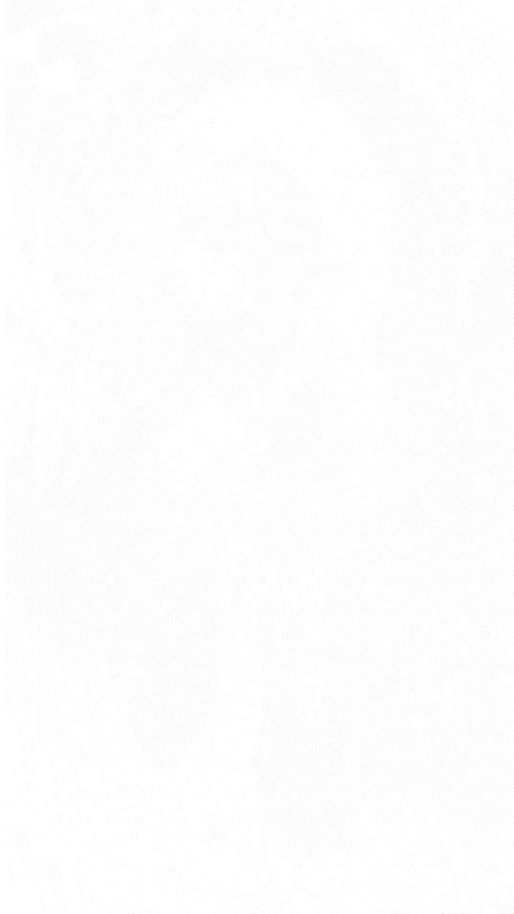


Fig. 1. *Christ Pantocrator*, icon, encaustic, 6th century, Sinai, the Monastery of Saint Catherine (after Weitzmann 1986)

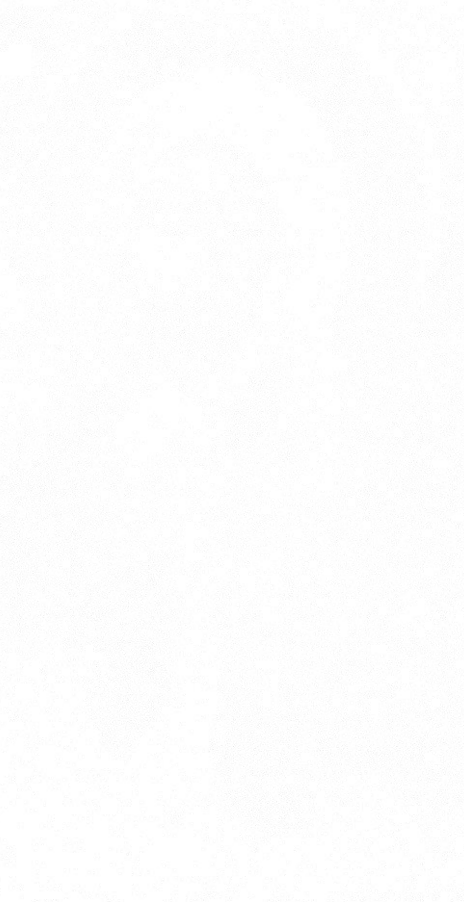


Fig. 2. *Serapis*, wing of a triptych, encaustic, 3rd century, Malibou, John Paul Getty Museum (after Weitzmann *et alii* 1987)

¹⁴ *Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte*, 107 (*Epitome* 382); English translation: Mango 1986: 40. All later Greek and Latin citations from the *Epitome* are collected by Dobschütz 1899: 107*–108* (Belege zu Kapitel II).

¹⁵ *Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte*, 107–108 (Fragment 11); English translation (with changes) after Mango 1986: 40.

The phrase $\tau\mu\eta\ \tau\epsilon\chi\epsilon\iota\ \Delta\iota\omicron\upsilon\gamma$ as well as the corresponding expression $\tau\omicron\iota\omicron\upsilon\tau\omega\ \gamma\iota\rho\ \sigma\kappa\omicron\mu\alpha\tau\iota\ \epsilon\lambda\lambda\eta\kappa\omicron\nu\omega\nu\ \pi\alpha\kappa\delta\epsilon\gamma\ \tau\omicron\eta\ \Delta\omicron\upsilon\alpha\ \gamma\rho\epsilon\phi\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota$ (which in John of Damascus follows the enumeration of the features making up this $\sigma\kappa\omicron\mu\alpha$), leave us in no doubt that the unfortunate painter depicted Christ in a manner similar to the rendition in the famous Sinaic icon (Fig. 1).¹⁶ It was exactly the physiognomical type of a mature man with a beard and long hair that predominated in Greek and Roman representations of Zeus (Jupiter) and other gods iconographically akin to him, such as Asclepius or Serapis (Fig. 2).¹⁷ Thus, the account in question, apart from its possible value as evidence in discussing the origins of Christ's images of this kind,¹⁸ is an exceptionally valuable – because direct – basis for considerations of how such images were perceived by the elites of Early Byzantium. It is the more interesting as it links the earlier tradition in this respect with manifestations of a new attitude, unknown to Theodore's predecessors, but adopted by his successors.

The principal message of the above-compared passages falls into the category of continuation: there is no reason for the existence of images of the bearded, long-haired Christ, so they should be absolutely rejected. The only difference between this and Epiphanius' standpoint – which indicates that the tradition going back to him was creatively continued by Theodore – lies in the character and weight of argumentation. What to the former was solely a lamentable mistake made by the artists poorly educated in theology and history, to the latter appeared as a blasphemous act prompted by treacherous pagans and posing a real threat to the faithful. In addition, while the Cypriot bishop confines himself to discrediting the pictorial formula itself as contradictory to the logic of the Gospels, the author of the *Ecclesiastical History* discerns and exposes its ideological background.

A change, on the other hand, is visible firstly in the manner in which Theodore presents his extremely negative attitude towards the pictures showing the Saviour $\tau\mu\eta\ \tau\epsilon\chi\epsilon\iota\ \Delta\iota\omicron\upsilon\gamma$. Unlike Epiphanius, who speaks for himself and on his own responsibility, Theodore only reports a suitably chosen (fabricated?) event. The facts themselves – the circumstances and consequences of that event – weigh against the depictions of Christ with a beard and long hair, and not some theoretical arguments. Of course, the strategy of bringing the reader round to the author's point of view (not necessarily, and even rarely expressed directly) by a suitable configuration of facts was imposed by the specificity of historiography itself. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of a student of the history of Byzantine discussion on the legitimacy of depicting the God Incarnate, the adoption of this strategy sets a significant precedent, the more important because regarding the facts of supernatural character. Theodore Anagnostes' predecessors did not use such a means of persuasion at all. It was

¹⁶ Weitzmann 1986: 13–15, Pl. I.

¹⁷ Weitzmann et alii 1987: ill. on p. 4.

¹⁸ For obvious reasons Theodore's text is referred to mainly by proponents of the theory of the Zeus origin of the image of the bearded Christ with long hair, like f.i. Holtzmann 1877; Dietrichson 1880: 90–136; Hinz 1973: 68–77; Dinkler 1980; Jensen 2005: 131–170. Some researchers even hold that it documents the direct influence of the statue of the Olympian Zeus on Christian artists' imagination. This masterpiece by Phidias, brought from Olympia to Constantinople in the early 5th century, was said to have remained in the Lausseion until 476, when the palace was burnt down together with the entire antique art collection accumulated in it. See especially Breckenridge 1959: 57–59; Mango, Vickers 1992: 95.

not until the 8th and 9th centuries that the architects of the Byzantine theology of the icon



Fig. 3. *Christ Pantocrator*, icon, encaustic, 6th century, Sinai, the Monastery of Saint Catherine (after Weitzmann 1986)

made the most of this means, cleverly interweaving their subtle theological argumentation with testimonies of the miracles which had accompanied the finding, creating, venerating or destroying of icons.¹⁹ It can therefore be said that Theodore paved the way for those who were to accept the bearded and long-haired type of Christ, so sharply criticized by him, and raise it to the rank of canon.

Secondly, a truly revolutionary change in an attitude to the question of images of Christ, this time entirely independent of the specificity of any literary genre, is evidenced by the sentence closing the story of a painter-blasphemer in the *Epitome* of Theodore's work. The reader, informed earlier of the crypto-pagan nature of images of the bearded Christ with long hair, learns from it that "τὸ ἄλλο σκάμα τοῦ σωτῆρος τὸ οἶλον καὶ Ἰλιθὺς τριχὼν ὀφθαλμοῦ τὸ φημισσῆσθαι" (the other form of Christ, viz. the one with short, frizzy hair, is more authentic).²⁰ The depictions of Christ corresponding to this characteristics (Fig. 3)²¹ appeared from the 5th to 7th centuries in the area between Syria

and Egypt.²² Due to their provenance and conformity with the cultural realities of the Near East, they may indeed have been regarded as historically credible or at least more plausible than those showing Christ with a beard and long hair.²³

However, the revolutionary character of the passage discussed here does not lie in an attempt to promote an alternative to the discredited formula but in merely admitting the thought of the possibility of reaching or at least coming closer to the truth about the Saviour's appearance. No Christian writer before Theodore had presented such a standpoint. Holding on to comparisons with Epiphanius, in this particular case we can

¹⁹ Cf. Avenarius 2005: 68–73, 90–93.

²⁰ *Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte*, 107 (*Epitome* 382); English translation: Mango 1986: 40.

²¹ Weitzmann 1986: 26–27, Pl. XI.

²² Breckenridge 1959: 59–62; Wessel 1963: 982; Thierry 1989.

²³ It is worth noting that in all probability for the same reasons almost two centuries later the physiognomical types of Christ discussed here clashed in artistic practice in pre-iconoclastic Byzantium: the bearded Pantocrator with long hair, appearing on Justinian II's coins from the first period of his reign (685–695), was superseded in the second period (705–711) by the bearded Pantocrator with short, frizzy hair. This issue is analyzed by, among others, Breckenridge 1959 and Thierry 1989.

speak not so much about a difference as about a real gulf between Theodore and his predecessors. The Cypriot bishop's criticism stemmed from his definitely hostile attitude to any images, whereas Theodore evidently was not generally against them. He accepted images of Christ and obviously felt the need to have them. It was out of concern for their correctness that he objected to the "Zeus-like" type, the use of which he considered blasphemous.

Summing up, the account of a blasphemous painter in Theodore's *Ecclesiastical History* documents both the persistence of the negative attitude towards images of the bearded Christ with long hair, shared by the intellectual elites of Early Byzantium, and the first forerunners of the standpoint which – paradoxically – in the 8th and 9th centuries underlay the development of the doctrine of these images' historical and theological veracity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte: Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte*, Hg. von G.Ch. Hansen (GCS), Berlin 1971.
- Avenarius, A. (2005): *The Byzantine Struggle over the Icon. On the Problem of Eastern European Symbolism*. Studia Historica Slovaca XXIII. Bratislava.
- Breckenridge, J.D. (1959): *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II (685–695, 705–711 A.D.)*. Numismatic Notes and Monographs 144. New York.
- Büchsel, M. (2003): *Die Entstehung des Christusporträts. Bildarchäologie statt Bildhypnose*. Mainz am Rhein.
- Dinkler, E. (1980): *Christus und Asklepios. Zum Christustypus der polychromen Platten im Museo Nazionale Romano*. Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 2. Heidelberg.
- Dietrichson, L.H.S. (1880): *Christusbilledet. Studier over den typiske Christusfremstillings Oprindelse, Udvikling og Opløsning*. Kjøbenhavn.
- Dobschütz E. (1899): *Christusbilder. Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende*. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur, Hg. von O. von Gebhardt und A. Harnack, Neue Folge, Band III. Leipzig.
- Florovsky, G. (1950): *Origen, Eusebius and the Iconoclastic Controversy*, *Church History* 19: 77–96.
- Grabar, A. (1957): *L'iconoclasme byzantin. Dossier archéologique*, Paris.
- Hinz, P. (1973): *Deus Homo. Das Christusbild von seinen Ursprüngen bis zur Gegenwart, I: Das erste Jahrtausend*. Berlin.
- Holtzmann, H.J. (1877): *Über die Entstehung des Christusbildes in der Kunst*, *Jahrbuch der Protestantischen Theologie* 3: 189–192.
- Jensen, R.M. (2005): *Face to Face. Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis.
- Kollwitz, J. (1968): *Christus, Christusbild*, in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, I. Rom–Freiburg–Basel–Wien: 359–363.
- Leclercq, H. (1927): *Jésus-Christ*, in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, VII.2, Paris: 2393–2408.
- Mango, C. (1986): *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453. Sources and Documents in the History of Art*, ed. H.W. Janson. Toronto–Buffalo–London.

- Mango, C., Vickers, M. and the late Francis, E.D. (1992): The Palace of Lausus at Constantinople and its Collection of Ancient Statues, *Journal of the History of Collections* 4: 89–98.
- Maraval, P. (1987): Epiphane 'Docteur des iconoclasts', in F. Boespflug, N. Lossky (eds.) *Nicée II. 787–1987. Douze siècles d'images religieuses*. Paris: 51–62.
- Sauer, J. (1924): *Das Aufkommen des bärtigen Christustypus in der frühchristlichen Kunst*, in *Strena Buliciana. Commentationes gratulatoriae Francisco Bulić ob XV vitae lustra feliciter peracta oblatae a discipulis et amicis*, M. Abramić, V. Hoffiller (curaverunt). Zagrebiae: 303–329.
- Skubiszewski, P. (1994): Cristo, in *Enciclopedia dell'arte medievale*, V. Roma: 493–521.
- Thièrry, N. (1989): *Sur un double visage byzantin du Christ du VI^e siècle au VIII^e*, in *Studi in memoria di G. Bovini*. Roma: II, 639–657.
- Thümmel, H.G. (1992): *Die Frühgeschichte der ostkirchlichen Bilderlehre. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Zeit vor dem Bilderstreit*. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 139. Berlin.
- Weitzmann, K. (1986): *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. The Icons, I: From the Sixth to the Tenth Century*. Princeton.
- Weitzmann, K., Alibegašvili, G., Volskaja, A., Chatsidakis, M., Babić, G., Alpatov, M., Voinescu, Th. (1987): *The Icon*. New York.
- Wessel, K. (1963): *Christusbild*, in *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, I. Stuttgart: 973–981.